

1

VOICES + VISIONS



A straight talking guide:

Find out about what it's like to hear voices, why it happens and how people can - and do - learn to cope.

ABOUT

This booklet has been put together in partnership with people who hear voices as part of Mind in Camden's London Hearing Voices Prison Project.

We have been working with prisons and secure units since 2010 to set up peer support groups for people who hear voices, see visions or have other unusual sensory experiences (Hearing Voices Groups). Our project also publishes information and booklets aimed at helping raise awareness about voice-hearing and the different ways people can cope.

For more information on the project, contact:

London Hearing Voices Project Mind
in Camden, Barnes House
9-15 Camden Rd, London, NW1 9LQ

T: 020 7911 0822

LHVN@mindincamden.org.uk

Or speak to a member of the mental health team
in your prison or secure unit.

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INTRODUCTION

I'd been living all these years in a strange isolated bubble, thinking I was unique, and then I realised that there were all these other people just like me

If you, or someone you know, hears voices or sees visions - you're not the only one.

Whilst many people think hearing voices or seeing visions is really rare, this isn't the case. Somewhere between 3 and 10% of people hear voices that other people don't. If you include one off experiences, like hearing the phone ring when no-one is calling you, this rises to 75%!

For most people, the voices simply don't cause a problem. Sometimes, though, the voices people hear can be very scary or confusing. The good news is that people can, and do, find ways of coping with these experiences and reclaiming their lives.

This booklet shares some basic information about voices and visions, including some of the different ways people understand experiences like these. It also tells you about some of the things that can help people who are struggling with difficult voices.

Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is suitable for anyone, whether or not they hear voices or see visions. Hearing Voices is such a common experience that, even if you don't hear voices, you probably know someone who does.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO HEAR VOICES?

I've been hearing voices since I was a teenager. At first it was hard to cope and I ended up in hospital. It felt like there was a party in my head, but I wasn't invited. I felt like I had no control. Now, years later, I can talk with these voices and set limits for them. They don't have the same power over me that they used to.

What are voices and visions?

When we talk about voices and visions, we mean any experience when you hear, see or sense something that other people around you don't. These experiences can include all five senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch.

For some, this experience can be reassuring. For example, someone who feels lonely might value a voice that is there for them when they're feeling down. For others, it can be confusing or frightening and cause a lot of distress.

How common is it?

Hearing voices is more common than most people think - affecting around 3-10% of the population. Even when the voices are distressing, people can find positive ways of dealing with them.

What's it like?

We are all unique. The way we experience, and react to, voices and visions is individual. The following is an overview of some of the experiences people often tell us about.

Hearing Voices

I hear people talking about me all the time, even when I'm alone in my cell. It makes me feel paranoid - even though I know that I'm the only one who can hear it.

Some people hear voices talking when no-one else is around. These could be like the voices of people they know, or complete strangers. They might hear many voices, or just one. Voices can shout, whisper, be clear or muffled. They can speak in sentences or say single words. These voices can be male, female, old or young. Sometimes they have names, but not always. They can sound like they're coming from inside your head, from the world around you or even parts of your body. People can hear other types of sounds too, including crying or music.

Some voices can be positive - encouraging or supporting you. Others may say things that are confusing or distracting, perhaps echoing thoughts or repeating strange phrases. Some voices can be very frightening, saying things that are critical, threatening or commanding. Others are funny, saying things that make you laugh.

Seeing Visions

I sometimes see people's faces change. One minute they look normal and the next they look like stone statues. It freaks me out.

Some people see things that others don't. These visions can be very clear and realistic, but they can also include fuzzy shapes, shadows and beams of light. Some people find that, often following a trauma or bereavement, they see people from their past. Others find that people or objects around them change shape or colour.

Smell

Sometimes, when I'm alone, I can smell burning. There's no one around to check it with, and I keep worrying that there's a fire somewhere. I don't feel safe.

Some people smell things that remind them of their past. This could be something nice, like a loved one's perfume or aftershave. Sometimes, especially after a trauma, these smells can bring back really difficult memories. For example, someone who has been trapped in a fire may smell smoke when they're stressed out. This can be really overwhelming.

Sometimes these smells aren't linked to a particular memory. For example, someone may feel that their food smells 'off' and struggle to eat it. Others may feel worried that their room smells funny, no matter how many people say it's ok.

Taste

There are times when my tastebuds go a bit strange. I try and eat things, but everything tastes like it's gone off.

It can be difficult to know if you're tasting something that others can't - unless you taste something in your food and get someone else to try it too. This can make taste experiences particularly difficult to deal with.

Some people get a strong bitter taste in their food or drink and, understandably, start to worry that there is something wrong with it. Others may taste things when they are not eating or drinking. They may taste something pleasant (like chocolate or a favourite food) or something they dislike (perhaps something bitter or metallic).

Feeling (touch)

I get worried that there's something in the back of my neck. The more I think about it, the more I can feel it

Some people can feel things on their skin when there doesn't seem to be anything there. They might feel something crawling over their skin, tickling, touching or pushing them. Sometimes people feel something underneath their skin, which can make them feel really worried about what's happening inside their body.

Understandably these experiences can be very confusing and frightening. It's not as simple as this, though. For others, these experiences can be reassuring. For example, someone who feels upset and lonely may feel reassured by a gentle hand on their shoulder. They might interpret it as a sign that someone is there to support them.

Or a mix of the above

Whilst some people experience these things in only one of their senses, many have a combination. For example, they may both hear and see someone speaking to them. They might have a strange taste in their mouth just before they see a vision. They may both see, and feel, something on their skin.

Activity: What are your experiences like?

Sometimes people know their voices and visions very well, and have a relationship with them. Others struggle to make sense of what they're hearing and seeing and feel very confused.

It can help to write down some basic characteristics of the voices (including name, age, gender, whether its positive/negative/neutral and any triggers that make it harder to deal with). Showing this to someone you trust can be a good starting point for a conversation.

MAKING SENSE OF VOICES & VISIONS

I had such a bad time growing up. I was beaten up, bullied, saw my mum die and then moved to the UK from Zimbabwe. No wonder my voices are angry.

Why does it happen?

There are many different ideas about why people hear voices - and no single answer suits everyone. Some people see them as a reaction to stressful situations, or as a creative way that our minds cope with things that trouble us. Research shows that over 70% of people who hear voices can link them to difficult life experiences or trauma.

Some people think of voices and visions as a special gift or ability. People may see them as spiritual experiences, or have other ways of understanding them based on their cultural background. Others see voices simply as a matter of individual difference - some people are left-handed, some people hear voices.

Some people see these experiences as symptoms of mental ill health, including: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, psychosis, depression and anxiety. For others they may be seen as reaction to legal or illegal drugs. Physical problems can also cause voices and visions (including certain types of epilepsy and acute infections).

A more helpful question



Given that many people don't have problems with hearing voices or visions, a more helpful question is:

Why do people hear voices that they struggle to cope with?

As Jacqui Dillon (a voice-hearer and Chair of the National Hearing Voices Network) says “**Bad things happen that drive you crazy**”

IS IT ALWAYS A PROBLEM?

I hear voices that talk about me day and night. It used to make me feel on edge. They'd say they were coming for me and I believed them. It was exhausting.

Although some people are very distressed by their voices, this isn't the whole story. 'Hearing Voices' includes a whole range of experiences. Some people hear voices that are merely annoying or a bit dull. Others have at least one voices that has a positive impact on their lives.

I like talking to my voices, sometimes. They have a good sense of humour and keep me company. When I'm low they know what to say to cheer me up.

Positive voices can provide inspiration, comfort or valuable guidance. In some cultures, hearing voices can be seen as a definite plus. Someone who hear voices may be thought of as having a special connection with the spirit world or their ancestors.

Even voices that criticise and attack aren't always a problem. Some people use them like a thermometer. When the voices get bad they take it as a sign that they're worried about something and take action. So, it's not always about what the voices say - it's often how you feel about what they say that counts.

Finally, some people who hear very negative voices believe that the strength they've gained in learning to stand up to these voices has made them a stronger person in other parts of their lives. This is often really hard to imagine if someone is really overwhelmed - and may feel like a distant dream. Still, people can - and do - find ways through.

WHAT MAKES THINGS WORSE?

I was stressed about money and family matters. I was tried and worried ... my partner was threatening to leave. It felt like my whole world was falling apart.

Sometimes voices can be overwhelming. They can shout, scream or threaten you, leaving you feeling scared and confused. It's not always what the voices say that's the problem, though. Even if the voices are OK, it can feel like there's no space left in your head and you might find your thoughts get muddled.

These difficult times don't come out of nowhere. With support, people can usually identify something that set them off or triggered them. These triggers are individual, but can include: exhaustion, lack of sleep, feeling isolated, feeling stressed or worrying about something, strong emotions (anger, guilt etc), reminders of a trauma, feeling unsafe and using drugs.

Activity: What are your triggers?

If you sometimes have difficult voices or visions, it can be really helpful to spend a little time thinking working out what your triggers are. Some people keep a diary to help them work it out.

LONELY? Vulnerable? **Feeling Judged**

Night time? Loud/busy places?

Anxious? **Bored?** Scared? **ANGRY?**

Ashamed?

Being praised?

Reminded of a trauma?

Feeling guilty?

ON YOUR OWN?

HOW CAN PEOPLE DEAL WITH DIFFICULT VOICES?

The best thing for me is to stand up to them. They are full of hot air and don't have any real power. Why should I let them run my life?



It can be really hard to manage difficult voices, especially ones that seem very powerful. When things are as tough as this, it's no wonder some people feel overwhelmed and believe that there is no hope. It can be helpful to know that people can, and do, find ways of dealing with difficult voices.

Like voices themselves, coping strategies are an individual thing - different people find different things helpful. More than this, different things work better at different times and in different situations. So, having lots of different ways of coping is important to help you feel more in control.

I always hated it when people told me how to cope with my voice. They didn't understand how hard it was for me. It took years, but eventually I started to find little things that helped quieten them down a bit.

It can be helpful to remember that developing new ways of coping with things you find overwhelming can be a real challenge. So, if you - or someone you know - is finding this difficult, you're not alone. A lot of these strategies take a bit of practice to master, but it's important that people choose ones that sound appealing to them.

There really is no 'one size fits all' approach.

BUILDING A TOOLBOX

Whilst there are lots of different types of strategies, we find it helpful to group them into four main categories: calming, blocking, expressing and empowering. Ideally, it helps if people have a few different strategies in each group.

***Calming/Safety* * * ***



When the voices are bad, sometimes it feels like things will never get better. At times like this it helps to find ways of holding on and taking care of yourself. These strategies help you get through the worst of it, weathering the storm until you feel able to talk about your experiences and find ways of making sense of them.

Prayers & Mantras

If you have a faith, you may find it helpful to read a holy or sacred book, pray or focus on a religious item (e.g. rosary). For some people, this faith can provide them with enough strength and resilience to hold on to when times are tough. If you don't have a faith, it's worth finding quotes, poems, song lyrics or a book that help you feel calmer. If you want to, you can write your own phrase to focus on (we call this a 'mantra'). Some people find it helps to write this down and keep it with them.

Relaxation

Deep breathing, Tai Chi, listening to music, yoga and meditation can help. More importantly, think about what relaxes you. Everyone's different, so one strategy won't work for everyone. Some people need quiet, others feel more relaxed when there's some background noise. Some people use visualisation and breathing to ground themselves, others need to do something practical. If you're not sure what works for you - create a list with someone you trust and try some strategies out.

Grounding

Grounding strategies are simply ways of connecting with yourself and the world around you. We each have five senses, and if you are struggling with voices and visions it can help to use your other senses to help. Some people use strong smells (essential oils or smelling salts). Others find holding on to a tennis ball, pebble or familiar object helps. The trick is to focus on it with your whole mind.

10 Things I Can Do

It's hard to remember strategies that help when you're struggling. So, many people find it helpful to write down a list of 10 different things that they can find helpful when things get tough. This can include things that can be distracting, expressing, calming and empowering. It can also include who you can speak to (e.g. Samaritans) and how to reach them.

Expressing * * *



Difficult voices are often linked to the way we are feeling. Sometimes they get worse if we're feeling angry or stressed out. Other times the voices themselves say things that sound very angry, even when we don't feel it ourselves. If we bottle these feelings up and don't do anything with them, voices can get worse. Expressing them (safely)

can help quieten down the voices - it gives them less fuel.

Singing

There's something great about singing. Some people find that the voices fade away into the background when they sing or hum. Others find that they care a lot less about what the voices say when they're singing something they enjoy. You might want to sing something that reminds you of a better time in your life, or a song that says how you feel. Writing your own lyrics can be really good too - just sing what's in your heart.

Writing

If you enjoy writing, you might like to use words to express yourself. You could write about yourself and what's on your mind. Some people use their experiences to write a journal or a book that can help to educate others and beat the stigma. Others write in secret and would never dream of showing it to the world. Either is 100% fine - it's up to you!

You can write stories, poetry or prayers. You can write about the voices, but you can also write about your hopes. If you're not sure where to start, why not try 'automatic writing'. This is where you write anything that comes in to your mind - the only rule is that you can't pause to think, or take your pen off the paper. Anything goes.

Drawing or Painting

Sometimes words don't help - especially if you find the voices confuse you or say things that make you feel really bad. Drawing, painting or making collages gives you the chance to show how you feel. If you want to, you can draw the voices. Once they're on paper you can do something with the picture to make the voices seem less scary. Some people tear the picture up, others draw a giant foot standing on the voices. It's up to you.

Get Active

Intense physical activity can really help express frustration or anger, but can also help if you feel powerless or scared. Try shadowboxing, star jumps, running on the spot, dancing, getting time at the gym or anything else that gets you moving.

Talking

Hearing Voices can feel very isolating. If no one else can hear the things you hear, you might feel like you can't talk about it to anyone. Keeping silent can just give the voices more power, though, and keep you from getting the help and support you need. Find someone you can trust and tell them how you're feeling. Going to a Hearing Voices Group can help.

Blocking * * *



Sometimes, especially if the voices are being particularly challenging or annoying, it can be helpful to have ways of blocking them out (or minimising them) for a while. Finding ways of taking a break from the voices can really help to make you feel more in control.

However, blocking is rarely helpful if used on its own in the long term. Try and think of it as getting some short term respite from the voices to enable you to find a way to make sense of them.

Distraction

This is often the first strategy people turn to when they have something difficult to deal with. It involves doing something that you find occupies and interests you, and helps you to focus your mind away from the voices. This could involve music, writing, talking to others, cleaning, doing Sudoku, working or watching TV.

Visualisation

Some people have great imaginations and are able to imagine a safe inside their minds in which they can lock the voice away for a limited amount of time. Others imagine a wall around them, and see the voices bouncing off it.

Medication

Some people find that sensible use of psychiatric medication can be useful to help lessen or block their voices. Medication can help give people the space to think through what has made things difficult for them. Hearing Voices Groups don't prescribe medication, so if you want to explore your options its important to talk with your doctor.

Remember that medication doesn't work for everyone. If this applies to you, don't lose heart. There are other ways of dealing with difficult voices.

Empowering



Sometimes, when voices feel very powerful, they can have a huge influence over what you say, do and feel. If the voices are helpful, this might not be much of a problem. However, if you hear voices that bully, command, threaten or terrorise you in other ways it's helpful to find ways of taking back some of that power.

Remember: Before trying these strategies try and make sure you have some ways of feeling calm and/or blocking the voices.

Voices can sometimes react badly to being questioned - they often like the status quo. If this happens to you, do something that helps you feel calm and safe again. It can take time to change the power balance, so don't be harsh with yourself. **Take it step by step and you'll get there.**

Saying 'No' or "Not Yet"

No matter who the voices say they are, or what they tell you to do, remember that you're in control of your own body. No one has the right to tell you what to do with it.

You might want to say 'in a minute' or 'I've just got to do this first' if saying 'no' feels too risky.

Saying 'no' isn't always easy – especially at first. You might find that the voices get louder, threaten you or are nasty. Sometimes it helps to think of them as if they're toddlers who are having a tantrum because they're not getting their own way. If no-one pays attention, they get bored.

If this happens, stay strong. Use some of the coping strategies you already have, or try some of the other ones in this booklet. Try to reward yourself for each time you delay acting on the voice's commands. Every second, minute or hour you resist is another step closer to gaining control.

Set Limits

If your voices say something that you wouldn't usually accept from someone in your life - tell them that. Try speaking to them in a calm and firm voice (in your head, out loud or in writing) that you don't agree with them and that you're not going to do what they say. Try not to get into an argument with them. Just say what you want to say and ask them to behave themselves.

Ask Questions

Voices do not always tell the truth. Sometimes they claim to be someone they're not (a God, someone from your past or a demon - for example). Other times they say things to confuse or gain power over you.

Some people find that their voices talk about things that are true most of the time, but occasionally say something that turns out to be a lie. Others find that the voices often say things that aren't true, but they are so frightening that they don't feel able to check it out.

If you feel able to, it can be useful to question what you know about the voices you hear. You might want to think about whether they are who they say they are (do you have any evidence to support their claims, or might they be tricking you).

You might also want to ask the voices questions too - how do they know what they say. It really helps to talk through their answers with someone you trust (maybe at a Hearing Voices Group) as voices rarely give straight answers.

Eleanor, a voice-hearer and psychologist, found that one of her turning points was realising that the voices needed her body to do anything. She challenged them to do the washing up. When they couldn't, she thought - well, if they can't even do that what power do they really have?

Become a Translator

Voices rarely say what they mean - often we need to be translators for them to try and work out what they're trying to say.

Anil* heard a voice that told him to kill himself. After thinking about how he felt about his life Anil started to think that the voice was trying to tell him that he was unhappy with the way his life had been going and that he needed to start afresh. Instead of kill himself, he ended the last chapter of his life and started a new one.

Dee* heard voices that told her that she was going to be burnt in hell. She felt tormented by this voice and felt that it was a powerful demon. Dee had had a really hard time growing up and was told that she was evil and bad. Like most children, she believed the adults that hurt her. Over time, Dee started to realise that the voice she heard was reminding her that she still felt like she deserved to be punished. She started to get help to deal with how she felt about herself and her traumatic memories.

Trying to be open to the different meanings, and talking them over with a Hearing Voices Group, a counsellor or worker can be really helpful.

Listen with Kindness

I used to yell back at the voices, but that only made them angrier. Now I tell it that I'm sorry it's mad, but I'm not going to do what it says. It doesn't change the voice, but it makes me feel like I'm the one in charge.

Few people are nasty to others unless they've had a really hard time themselves. It can help to view voices as bullies that have been bullied - and being gentle with them, whilst staying firm about what you will and won't do. This can really help you feel more powerful and in control.

GETTING SUPPORT

I always felt that the voices were stronger than me. They ran my life. The Hearing Voices Group has given me the strength to stand up to them.

Dealing with difficult voices can be really hard, especially if you're in prison. If you, or someone you know, is having a hard time - help is out there.

Mental Health & Substance Misuse Teams

If you're feeling overwhelmed it's really important to tell someone (your personal officer or someone else that you feel you can talk to). If you're not already seeing someone from a mental health team, ask for a referral. Most prisons have counselling projects or someone you can talk to - but speaking to someone from the mental health team is a good starting point.

Chaplains

If you feel that your voices are spiritual, or you find that your faith is a source of strength, ask if you can speak to a Chaplain. They are often good at listening and giving empathic support.

Samaritans Listeners

Everyone in prison should have access to a phonenumber to call the Samaritans. This is independent from this prison and 100% confidential. You can also ask to speak to a Listener (a prisoner who has been giving training by the Samaritans).

Hearing Voices Group

If your prison or secure unit has a Hearing Voices Peer Support Group it's worth giving it a try. The group's aren't therapy or treatment, they're simply safe spaces where people support each other to find a way to cope.

SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY

When you leave prison or hospital, it's good to know that there is a lot of support available in the community to help you get back on your feet.



HEARING VOICES NETWORK

www.hearing-voices.org | 0114 271 8210 | nhvn@hotmail.co.uk

There are over 180 Hearing Voices Groups in the UK (and groups available all over the world - from Uganda to New Zealand). You can contact the Hearing Voices Network to: find out if there's a group near you. HVN also have an information line, website and online support forum.

LONDON HEARING VOICES NETWORK

www.mindincamden.org.uk | 020 7911 0822

If you live in Greater London, you can contact the London Hearing Voices Network to find out what support is available in your borough.

NACRO RESETTLEMENT ADVICE SERVICE

helpline@nacro.org.uk | 020 7840 1212

Offers expert advice and advocacy to people facing barriers as a result of their offending history.

MIND INFO LINE

www.mind.org.uk | 0300 123 3393 | info@mind.org.uk

Mind's infoline offers information on a range of mental health topics, including: treatment, where to get help and advocacy. If you want to find support in your area it's a good place to start.

SAMARITANS

www.samaritans.org | 08457 90 90 90 | jo@samaritans.org

Samaritans offer non-judgemental support 24 hours a day 365 days a year.