

# The Experience of HEARING VOICES

— Brett Brasher, LCSW, CADCI, LMFT, CCS-G  
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*People make sense of hearing voices based on their own life experiences. It is a narrative process, a lonely journey into the recesses of the mind. The search for meaning allows the person to organize the relationship between self and the voices. This can help ease anxiety and give moments of peace.*

**T**he three major Western religions are based on the experiences of those who heard voices—Moses, Jesus, Mohammed. Voice hearing was also a major part of the experience for Joan of Arc, Saint Augustine, Socrates, and Galileo.

While hearing voices can be an aspect of the experience of schizophrenia, hearing voices does not mean someone has schizophrenia. Many conditions can lead to hearing voices and there are many people who hear voices and have no recognized mental illness. Voice hearing has cultural manifestations and has been connected to trauma, distress, sleep deprivation, and physical illness, as well as to highly gifted, spiritual, and intelligent individuals throughout history.

Just as people may hear voices for a number of reasons, the experience itself may be quite different. While many people find the voices intrusive, others have made peace with the experience. In addition, some societies/cultures are more tolerant and respectful of 'voice hearers' than other cultures.

## What Are Voices?

Often referred to as auditory hallucinations, voices can be very ordinary and can relate to ongoing activities as with ordinary inner speech. The voices are typically oriented towards the voice hearer without direct access to each other or to other people. Voices are not persons in the sense of being capable of reflection. There could be no voices who hear voices.

Common myths include: 1) Only people diagnosed with schizophrenia hear voices; 2) Voices make no sense; 3) There is nothing anyone can do; 4) Talking about voices makes them worse.

It was traditionally thought that voices made no sense and therefore could not be understood. Now, more people recognize that the voices can be understood in the context of a person's life experiences and offer reflection on issues that the voice hearer has had difficulty dealing with.

Hearing voices can be a sign of distress, not illness. How one copes with the voices makes the difference in the individual's sense of well being. It is the content of, and relationship with, voices that is the issue.

## Are Voices Real?

As yet, we don't fully understand the mechanism that causes someone to hear voices. However, progress is being made. Brain scans indicate activity in the part of the brain dealing with the recognition of speech, when a voice is heard.

What is certain is that the voices are very real for the person who's hearing them. From the voice hearer's perception, it's similar to everyday hearing. Regardless the origin, the experience is real. It is as real as listening to your friend talk about a wonderful experience. The brain lights up.

## What's It Like To Hear Voices?

It is estimated that only 20% of people with a mental illness find their voices to be reassuring. Most often the voices are perceived by the hearer as threatening, powerful, and disturbing.

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The content of the voices can bring anxiety, despair, and fear. Voices often have a great deal of power over the voice-hearing person. The voices may know secrets about the person which only they know to the exclusion of others. This provides evidence to the person of the voice's added power.

Voices may appear to know what the individual is thinking or planning. All of this makes one feel very vulnerable and exposed, believing that the voices know personal thoughts and feelings previously known only to them. Within this context it becomes difficult to distinguish between thoughts and voices. Hearing voices at the core is an invasion of privacy.

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## What Might Voices Say?

Voices may make comments about the person, about their actions, how they look, the clothes they've chosen to

wear, and how they appear to others. They can be very derogatory with the effect of lowering self-esteem and thus gaining more power. They may refer to the failures in a person's life, academic, for example, or a broken relationship. They may make comments about other people, telling the hearer that these people can or cannot be trusted. Voice hearers will look for evidence to support this advice and will likely find it, in their own way.

Voices can also be directive. They can give instructions with consequences if the action is not carried out. This can be very difficult for the voice-hearing person. Compliance with the voices may placate them and reduce the ongoing pressure. That also means a sense of failure having given into the voice's power. Not complying with the wishes of the voices may serve to exacerbate them further and this places the voice-hearer under a great deal of pressure.

### Onset of Voices

People talk about first hearing voices, about trying to make sense of them and being afraid to tell others. Telling others may generate stigma, institutionalization, or medications. The individual greatly fears a loss of control.

Other worries for the person include: Am I the only person ever to experience this? Am I mad? Will they go away or will they be here forever? Why has this happened to me? All of these concerns are within the context of voices being present and exerting their power.

It is common to use denial to cope with voices, believing that if the voices are denied they will go away. Other coping strategies include: constant activity, playing music loudly trying to drown out the voices, alcohol misuse in an attempt to blot out the voices, drug misuse (prescribed medication as well as illegal drugs), allowing fear and frustration to take over, becoming isolated, taking to bed and turning night into day, self-harm, smoking cigarettes, taking instructions from the voices and carrying out what appear to be bizarre patterns of behavior.

It is also possible for the individual to develop more constructive ways of coping with the voices.

*Some material taken from: "Understanding Voices – a guide for relatives and friends." Fife Hearing Voices Network, UK.*

# VOICES

*I once worked with a woman who had three voices. One voice was telling her to kill herself. Another voice kept repeating what others around her said. A third voice was just background noise. All of this led to her feeling very distressed. I asked her what emotion came with the voice telling her to kill herself? She said it was, "fear and terror." What emotion came with the voice that repeated everything others said? She said, "anger." What emotion came with the voice that was just the background noise? She said, "frustration."*

*We began to work on strategies to better handle fear, anger, and frustration, an approach that led to an improved sense of mastery.*



## Changing the Relationship

– Brett Brasher, LCSW, CADCI, LMFT, CCS-G, Alcohol/Drug Treatment Program

**L**earning to constructively cope with one's voices is a complex internal process that cannot be accomplished unaided. Those who hear voices must find the opportunity to talk about it, exchange experiences, and even complain about it in order to become stronger in themselves. Successful copers report that it is imperative to treat the voices as a third party, and to learn to say 'no,' as one would to any outlandish suggestion.\*

For persons who have a mental illness, the most important elements in recovery are family support, a believing therapist, steadfast friends, meaningful work – people who believe in the individual and offer hope.

From my perspective, there is more pain in schizophrenia due to a loss of dreams than a loss of dopamine.

Recovery also includes grieving this loss and then going on in a different way. Providers can assist voice hearers understand that the negative voices may transport important messages by using metaphors which may be worthwhile to decode.

Voice hearers who develop individual explanations seem to be better equipped to deal with their voices. There is a similarity between an internal dialog and hearing voices. Studies have shown activity in the same region of the brain. Brain activity is the same when we are talking and seeing as when there are auditory/visual hallucinations.

Recognizing patterns is useful to making peace with the voices. Discuss voices in the same way one might talk about disagreeable relatives, unplanned traveling companions, or drunken bullies

who like to tease and torment for the fun of it. It is possible to learn to recognize their games and tricks as well as the more pleasant aspects. Voices are part of the individual's life even if they don't always like them. They're similar to some family members.

Most importantly, negative voices lie. They find a weak point of conscience and work on it. The good voices have some control over the bad ones, but not to the degree the individual might like.

Connection with others rather than isolation is essential. Communication helps acceptance and as a result, self-confidence is improved. Talking to others allows sharing of common experience.

Many individuals feel they are alone in the experience. This often leads to avoiding situations which might trigger the hearing of voices. Avoidance often exacerbates the problem. Negotiation with the destructive voices is often more productive than attempts to ignore.

Developing a theoretical perspective is also helpful in easing anxiety. Perspectives may include: biological (hearing voices is due to a brain dysfunction); psychological (the experience is a result of a trauma); or mystical (a transcendent experience or a different level of consciousness). Some even see it as a religious experience, as a contest between God and the Devil. Whatever the perspective, a meaning allows one to organize the relationship and ease the anxiety. Healing occurs as the relationship with the experience starts to change.

Finding meaning appears essential in the development of coping strategies. Perspectives that discourage the person from seeking mastery of the voices tend to yield the least positive results.

Accept voices as belonging to the self. This increases a sense of responsibility. It also helps to recognize the meaning. Discussing the nature of the messages and the specific content can be very valuable. Some individuals decide to call a meeting of the voices which is similar to an orchestra, a business meeting, a family or a staff meeting.

Models of recovery need to emphasize that emotional distress is a temporary disruption in one's life. Dr. Daniel Fisher says, "My description of mental illness is a combination of severe emotional distress and an interruption

*The goal is to gain more control over the relationship with the voices, not to cure them. Many times voices will reappear during periods of stress. Hearing voices reflects an attempt to cope with emotions. Voices have meaning to the person. Only those techniques that address meaning are likely to help the person take ownership of the experience.*

*(1) Diary. Communication helps find some order. A diary is a private form of communication.*

*(2) Self-help Groups. Groups are very important. The group counters isolation and loneliness and provides a structure for discussion.*

*(3) Focusing. Techniques designed to pay closer attention to the voices by monitoring or writing down what they say. Through a series of gradual nonthreatening exercises individuals can listen and describe the physical aspect of the voices.*

*(4) Distraction. Use of ear plugs, headphones, shouting, cell phones. Although these may be effective in the short term, they fail to address the underlying content of the voices.*

*(5) Triggers. Identify the situations, emotions, and people associated with the voices. Voices tend to react to something recognizable. They may recall a trauma, interfere with life, or even try to protect the hearer. Composing a life history may enable the person to see a link between the voice and the specific life event.*



## **Taking Control**

*(6) Autonomy. Individuals need roles in society that foster identity and independence. Living independently, having a job and a degree of financial independence gives a role and worth to the individual.*

*(7) Anxiety Management. Hearing voices is not pleasant. Management of the associated anxiety is vital. Relaxation techniques, baths, exercises, and certain foods can ease the tension that accompanies hearing voices.*

*(8) Trusting Relationship. For voice hearers, everyday life is not the only concern. They need time, permission, and space for a preoccupation with the voices. Hearing voices is, at the core, an invasion of privacy. It is important to have individuals in one's life who can be trusted and who care.*

*(9) Medication. Medication can decrease symptoms in 75% of people who have schizophrenia and reduce risk of relapse by 30 – 40%. The sooner an individual begins taking medication after a first episode, the better the chance for recovery from the experience.*

*– Some material from Romme & Escher, "Accepting Voices," Mind Publications, '93.*

of a person's place in the community and social role, being a worker, parent, a participant in overall community life, which is not dissimilar from what is considered a mental disorder in DSM-IV."

The most important finding in his research is that people who have shown significant or complete recovery from severe mental illness have cited

hope as an extraordinarily important component in their recovery. A key was being around people who saw their condition not as permanent, but a condition for which they could increasingly take control of their life and reestablish a place in society.

*\*Quote from, S. Escher, "Accepting Voices."*

A nonprofit agency dedicated to comprehensive mental health & substance abuse services, and advocacy

# MHC

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## VOICES

### Changing the Relationship

#### Mental Health Center of Dane County, Inc.

The mission of the Mental Health Center of Dane County, Inc. is to provide individuals and families with high quality, community based and recovery oriented mental health, substance abuse, and advocacy services that respect cultural differences and foster hope, strength, and self-determination. We will give priority to individuals/families with high needs & low resources.

Children, teens, adults, seniors, and families have received MHCDC services for 55+ years. With nine agency locations and outreach to community sites (homes, schools, workplaces, senior centers, etc), the MHC is one of Dane County's largest community nonprofit agencies.

#### Useful Websites & Resources

- Schizophrenia  
[[www.mindinfo.co.uk/](http://www.mindinfo.co.uk/)]  
[[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/schizophrenia.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/schizophrenia.html)]
- "Accepting Voices," Prof Marius Romme & Sandra Escher, Mind Publications, '93.
- "Working with Voices (Victim to Victor S.)," Ron Coleman & Mike Smith; Handsell Publications
- "The Voice Inside, A Practical Guide to Coping With Hearing Voices," Paul Baker; Hearing Voices Network; Handsell Publications

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