Hearing voices is a common type of hallucination. A hallucination is the experience of perceiving something that other people do not. When a person is hearing voices they believe someone is talking when there is nobody actually there. This fact sheet aims to provide information on how voices occur and how to deal with them.

**KEY POINTS**

- Hearing voices is a common symptom of a severe mental illness, but not all people that hear voices are ill, and many people will have such an experience in their lives.
- Voices can be friendly and encouraging but also nasty and critical. Sometimes the voice can tell the hearer to carry out certain acts which can be harmful.
- The most common form of treatment is anti-psychotic medication.
- Talking therapies are also known to be effective, particularly CBT.
- Some people manage their voices by learning to accept them as part of their lived experience.

This factsheet covers –

1. How do voices occur?
2. The experience of hearing voices
3. How do people deal with hearing voices?
4. Useful Contacts
1. How do voices occur?

Using brain imaging techniques, researchers have shown that people who hear voices cannot tell the difference between inner speech and outer voices due to problems in brain function. So when a person with psychosis speaks to themselves internally or repeats conversations in their head they may experience voices from outside.¹

Research shows that 10% -15% of people will hear voices or experience other hallucinations at some point in their lives and it is not always a sign of mental illness². Neurological and physical problems can also cause a person to hear voices, and voices can be triggered or made worse by factors such as anger, stress and anxiety.³

2. The experience of hearing voices

Hearing voices may not necessarily be distressing. What really matters is the effect that hearing voices has upon your life. Hearing voices can be comforting, positive or inspiring, with some people responding and seeing the experience as just a variation in human existence, requiring no cure. For others, the experience of hearing voices can be highly distressing and disturbing and can have a negative effect on their lives, which is when many decide to seek help. Sometimes they can be distressing because of the stigma attached to the experience in our culture and the way in which people who hear voices often seem like they are talking to themselves. In other cultures, voice hearing is a normal and valued part of life.⁴

Voices can be critical, hostile and even push someone towards antisocial acts against themselves or others. Sometimes the nature of the voice can change, with positive voices turning hostile and critical over time. Negative voices can come at times of extreme personal stress, or when someone is feeling particularly low.

Sometimes hearing voices can be worsened by the use of drugs such as amphetamines, ecstasy or cannabis. Even though the use of cannabis can make someone feel more relaxed, it has been found that regular use can make the chances of hearing voices more likely.⁵

It has been estimated that ten per cent of us hear voices that aren't there, with only a small minority of hearers likely to ever receive a clinical diagnosis. These recent studies have shown that psychotic-like symptoms, such as hearing voices, are not as rare among the general population as initially thought.⁶
3. How do people deal with hearing voices?

People deal with voices in a number of ways and the method chosen may depend on the cause of the voices. What is important is to find a method or a combination of methods that works for you.

**Medication**

Anti-psychotic medication is used to help with symptoms of psychosis, where someone might be out of touch with their usual reality. They are not a cure for psychosis but can help with symptoms such as hearing voices. For some people the right medication can stop the voices altogether or make them sound more distant. They do not work for everyone and can have unpleasant side effects. It may be necessary to try more than one drug before you find one which is effective. ‘Only The Best Medication’ is a Rethink Mental Illness publication which provides information on the range of antipsychotics that may be available to someone who is hearing voices and help on getting the most from your medication. Further information can also be found in our factsheet ‘Antipsychotics’, which is available to download for free from www.rethink.org/factsheets

**Talking therapies**

Some talking therapies have proved effective for people who hear voices. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in particular may help you with hostile voices and reduce the delusions that often accompany them, or help you ignore the voices. You could suggest this to your psychiatrist as more and more professionals are using CBT to treat psychotic symptoms such as hearing voices. Therapy can also help you to learn how to recognise what might trigger episodes of voice hearing, and to notice patterns in the voices so that you are prepared for dealing with future episodes. Often stress has a part to play in triggering voices, and practicing stress management can help with symptoms. Voices often express things that you think about yourself, and fears you may have, feeding off low self esteem. Learning to be positive about yourself can help reduce the intensity of negative voices. This takes time and can be tricky, and sometimes a therapist may be needed to help you do this.

**Other ways of coping with voices**

Whether you take notice of, talk to or ignore your voices depends on the individual. Some people find that ignoring or not accepting the voices can make the experience worse while others set aside time when they will listen to them, and other times when they will ignore them. For some people however, engaging with their voices or talking back can make the voices worse.

Talking to the voices can be an embarrassing and sometimes stigmatising experience. Some people have overcome this by talking while pretending to use the phone. When you do not wish to listen to them, you may find listening to music, the radio or an audio-book can help distract you and focus your attention on something else engaging.
Keeping a record of your voices in the form of a diary can help you identify how often they happen and what triggers them. It may be that doing particular things make them worse, and this might help you discover new coping strategies.⁹

Many people find that talking to other voice hearers can be a useful way of coming to terms with their experiences. New perspectives about managing voices have developed which may reduce your need for medication. Some aim to encourage people to accept, understand and ‘live with their voices’, in a way that gives some control and helps them to regain some power over their lives. This could be something explored through a local self help group in your area. The Hearing Voices Network provides the opportunity for people to talk freely about hearing voices and offer practical help and support. As well as helping to explore ways of managing the voices, talking to others can help you to reduce feelings of isolation and boost your self-confidence.
**The Hearing Voices Network** works to reduce the isolation of people who hear voices through providing information and support through its website, telephone helpline and self help groups across the country. Their main publication "Coping with Voices and Visions" can be obtained from them for a small price. They can be contacted at -

Hearing Voices Network, c/o Sheffield Hearing Voices Network, Limbrick Day Service, Limbrick Road, Sheffield, S6 2PE

Information and Helpline - 0114 271 8210
Email - nhvn@hotmail.co.uk  Web - www.hearing-voices.org

**Mental Health Care** is a website providing regular up to date and reliable information on psychosis, including hearing voices. It is possible to ask clinical psychologists and psychiatrists questions who will then aim to respond.

Web - www.mentalhealthcare.org.uk

**Intervoice** are an interactive online community where people can share experiences and find information on publications relating to hearing voices.

Web - www.intervoiceonline.org
REFERENCES


2 Raj Persaud. Recent Advances in understanding mental illness and psychotic experiences; A report by The British Psychological Society Division of Clinical Psychology. The British Psychological Society, 2001


4 See reference 2

5 See reference 3


7 See reference 2

8 See reference 2

9 See reference 3
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