

how to



cope with
hearing voices

How to cope with hearing voices

This booklet is for anyone who hears voices and wants to understand why and what things might help if their voices are a problem, and their friends and family.

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What are voices?

We might say someone is 'hearing voices' if you hear a voice when no-one is present with you, or which other people with you cannot hear. People have many different experiences of hearing voices. Some people don't mind their voices while others find them frightening and distracting.

It's common to think that if you hear voices you must have a mental health problem. But research shows that lots of people hear voices and most of them are not mentally unwell. It's a common human experience.

Some people also see things that others can't see. Others have touch, smell or taste sensations which they can't explain in everyday ways. These experiences are called hallucinations. This does not make it abnormal – it's just a word for a perception you may have that is not shared by those around you.

●● *I hear hundreds of voices. Partly relatives, friends and people in the media.* ●●

What kind of voices do people hear?

There are lots of different ways we all hear voices. You might:

- hear your name called when there is no one with you
- hear or see things as you are falling asleep
- experience the voices as being in your head
- feel voices are coming from outside and heard through your ears like other sounds
- feel as if you are hearing other people's thoughts or as if other people can hear your thoughts
- experience nasty or threatening voices that tell you to do dangerous and unacceptable things or try to control you
- hear a voice that feels friendly but encourages you to do things that

might not be good for you

- hear a kind supportive voice or a voice that helps you
- hear more than one voice and they may talk or argue with each other

👂👂 *I remember hearing this malicious whispering which I assumed was coming from other passengers on the train...it was like being able to hear people's thoughts and in my paranoid state these were always malevolent and critical.* 👂👂

Why do I hear voices?

There are lots of reasons why you might hear voices. Here are some of them:

- **Voices as you fall asleep or wake up** - these are to do with your brain being partly in a dreaming state. The voice might call your name or say something brief. You might also see strange things or misinterpret things you can see. These experiences usually stop as soon as you are fully awake.
- **Lack of sleep** - this can cause you to hear voices or have other sensory experiences that you can't explain in everyday ways.
- **Hunger** - you may hear voices if you are very hungry or if you haven't eaten much recently.
- **Physical illness** - if you have a high temperature and are delirious you may hear voices or see and say strange things.
- **Drugs** - you may hear or see things after taking street drugs or as a side effect of some prescribed drugs. You might also have these experiences when you are coming off drugs.
- **Bereavement** - if you have recently lost someone very close you may hear them talking to you or feel that they are with you. This experience is very common and some people find it comforting.
- **Abuse or bullying** - you may hear the voice of the person who abused you being unkind or threatening or ordering you to harm yourself or do things that you know are wrong. This is especially so if

you experienced the abuse in childhood when you had not learned the coping skills you needed to protect yourself.

- **Other traumatic experiences** - you may hear voices as a result of other traumas. You may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Hearing several different voices may be associated with traumatic experiences and with dissociative disorders.
- **Spiritual experiences** - some people hear a voice as part of a spiritual experience. This may be a very special experience and one that you feel helps you make sense of your life. Or you may feel as though you are hearing the voice of an evil spirit.
- **Mental health problems** - you may hear voices if you experience psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or severe depression.

👉👉 *I started hearing voices when I was 16. It resulted from a traumatic event in my life that led to weeks of a manic period.* 👉👉

What's it like to live with voices?

Your relationship with your voices

You may have different feelings about your voices at different times in your life - or even at different times of the day or week. You might:

- find your voices comforting, helpful or even funny
- find your voices frightening and want them to stop
- find you hear some voices that you like and other voices that cause you problems
- worry that you're the only one hearing the sort of voices that you hear
- not be sure whether other people have these experiences too

Often voices are a problem because of your relationship with them rather than just because you hear them. Thinking about your relationship with your voices can help you work out what (if anything) you want to do about them. See 'How can I help myself cope' on p.10 for more information.

What if I like my voices?

Some people can find hearing voices a positive experience. Your voices might be friendly and supportive. You may welcome them and miss them if they stopped. They might make you feel better or encourage you during difficult times.

Can my voice be my friend?

It isn't always easy to work out whether your voices want the best for you or not. They might feel friendly but tell you to do things that make it harder for you to look after yourself or live the life you want. If your voice feels comforting it can be hard to recognise that they might be manipulative or harmful.

●● *I first started hearing voices when I was developing my anorexia. My voices were my best friend. I thought she just wanted the best for me... she was extremely manipulative and whatever she said I would do.* ●●

Difficult experiences of voices

You might find your experience of hearing voices quite difficult. For example you may feel that:

- my voices are harder to deal with at specific times
- I don't feel able to control my voices
- I feel threatened and upset by my voices
- my voices make me lash out and hurt other people

My voices are harder to deal with at specific times

- You might only hear voices at certain times. This might be every day (for example, at mealtimes) or at certain times of year (for example,

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at the anniversary of a particular event or experience).

- You may only hear voices in certain places. For example, you might hear voices when you leave the house or when you go to a place which you associate with stress or trauma.
- You may find your voices are louder and more frequent when you feel stressed.

This may mean you avoid certain places or experiences - or find them very difficult.

I don't feel able to control my voices

You may feel that your voices are controlling you or stopping you from doing things that you would really like to do. Your voices might interrupt your thoughts and make it very difficult to concentrate or hold a conversation.

👉👉 *I had an interview .. I left the house and the whispering started, growing steadily louder until I eventually fled home drenched in sweat and absolutely terrified.* 👉👉

I feel threatened or upset by my voice

Your voices might, be unkind to you, and criticise and undermine you. They might tell you to do things that are wrong

These experiences are likely to make you upset, scared or angry. You might feel you deserve to be shouted at and that it's difficult to stand up to anyone.

My voices make me lash out or hurt other people

Your voices might demand that you hurt other people or yourself. You might find it very difficult to resist doing what they say. You may lash out

at others or hurt yourself because your voices make you angry and frustrated.

Talking to other people

It can be hard to talk about hearing voices. The way other people react can make a big difference to your experience. You may feel about to cope with your voices, but find that other people's reactions are more of a problem, or you might feel you need to hide what your voices say or how often you hear them altogether. You might find that other people:

- give your voices meanings or assume that your voices mean you are seriously ill
- don't mind about your voices and accept them as part of who you are
- don't understand what hearing voices is like, which can be frustrating

👉👉 *I didn't want to speak about it because that would somehow make it more real.* 👉👉

It may be easier to talk about your voices if you choose someone who you trust and feel comfortable with. If you are worried about their reaction you could show them this information.

Facing stigma

Unfortunately some people have misconceptions about what it means to hear voices. They might think that hearing voices means you are dangerous or very unwell. This can be really upsetting, especially if the people who feel this way are family, friends or colleagues.

It's important to remember that you aren't alone and you don't have to put up with people treating you badly. Here are some options for you to think about:

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- Show people this information to help them understand more about what hearing voices is really like.
- Talk to other people who hear voices by going to a support group - or setting one up for yourself.
- Know your rights. Our online legal rights guides provide more information. Search 'legal rights' on Mind's website.
- Take action with Mind. Search 'campaigns' on Mind's website for details of the different ways you can get involved with helping us challenge stigma.

How can I help myself cope?

Understand your voices

Understanding more about voices in your life now and how they relate to your past may help you:

- feel more in control
- recognise when your voices are causing problems
- stand up to your voices
- develop a better relationship with your voices so they don't interfere with your life or prevent you from making your own choices.

 *I understand I don't have to give in to their demands. I can negotiate and wait before acting on instructions and try grounding techniques to distract myself.* 

These questions might help you think about how your voices relate to your past.

- What was happening when I first heard voices?
- Where was I? How was I feeling?
- What did they say?
- What did they sound like? What age were they?

- Do they represent a person or problem?
- Are there any patterns to the voices?

You may be able to identify voices as individuals from your past or as representing yourself at different ages. They may be related more indirectly to a traumatic event.

●● *My voices were very prevalent around food times and times I was doing nothing.* ●●

These questions might help you think about voices in your life now.

- Do I hear voices at a particular time or place?
- What is happening when I hear voices?
- What do the voices want me to do?
- What do I want to do?

You may start to recognise when your voices are causing problems and what makes them worse. This could help you identify when you need to look for support or look after yourself. It may help you feel more in control.

Some people find that keeping a diary can help them answer some of these questions. For example, you could record when you hear voices, what they say, their tone of voice and how they made you feel. Looking back over what you've written could help you see any patterns to the voices and understand how they affect you over a longer period of time.

Will I ever get rid of my voices?

Some people do get rid of their voices. But many people find that they never go completely. Finding an approach that works best for you can help you come to terms with your voices and develop a better relationship with them.

Take control

You may not want to explore the story behind your voices in depth. But there are still things you could do to help you feel more in control. Here are some suggestions:

- Ignore the voices, block them out or distract yourself. You could try listening to music on headphones, exercising, cooking or knitting. You might have to try a few different distractions to find what works for you.
- Give them times when you agree to talk to them and times when you will not.
- Tell them that you would like to wait before you do what they say.
- Stand up to them. Tell them they have no power over you and try to ignore their commands and threats.
- Try to ignore the voices you don't like and focus on the ones you find easier to listen to.
- Try and 'ground' yourself in what is around you by focusing on doing something simple like watering a plant or washing up. See Mind's online guide *How to cope with mindfulness* for more information on this technique.



We would write letters to my voice to ask what it was they wanted from me and how I didn't like what they were doing to me anymore.

Talk to other people who hear voices

Peer support groups for people who hear voices can:

- help you feel less alone - you may be relieved to hear that other people have similar experiences
- help you talk about hearing voices in a safe, non judgmental place
- help you gain new perspectives and insight into your voices

- allow you to help others too
- help you feel accepted and listened to
- be great for your self esteem
- encourage you to make your own choices and decisions about how you want to deal with your voices

The Hearing Voices Network runs over 180 groups across the UK. Your local Mind may also run voices groups. See 'Useful contacts' on p.20.

If you don't want to attend a support group or can't find one locally then you could think about looking for online support. You might like to try:

- The Hearing Voices Network's forum
- Intervoice's online forum
- Elefriends - a supportive online community run by Mind

See 'Useful contacts' on p.20 for details, and Mind's online guide *How to stay safe online* for more information.

Look after yourself

- **Try to get enough sleep.** Sleep can give you the energy to cope with difficult feelings and experiences. Voices may make it difficult for you to get enough sleep. You might find it helpful to learn relaxation techniques.
- **Think about your diet.** Eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar stable can make a difference to your mood and energy levels.
- **Try and take some exercise.** Exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing.

Spiritual help

If you feel that your voices are a spiritual experience, you might want to talk to someone from your faith. Unfortunately not everyone will understand your experience but some psychiatrists may be able to suggest someone who can help.

The recovery approach

The Hearing Voices Network have a particular approach to voices. They say that you should try to accept that your voices are real, that they come from you and belong to you and that they are related to your life history.

This is based on an approach called the recovery approach. It uses the word 'recovery' in a slightly different way than usual. The main principles of the recovery approach are:

- living the best life you can with your life experiences and the consequences they have had
- building your resilience and wellbeing and focusing on what you can do, not what you can't
- making your own choices
- being your own person
- seeing recovery as a journey, not a destination and accepting you might have setbacks
- seeing setbacks as ways of learning more about yourself and what works (and doesn't work) for you
- maintaining hope

See 'Useful contacts' on p.20 for details of Hearing Voices Network.

What treatment is available?

How will I be diagnosed?

If you go to your GP they may refer you to a psychiatrist who may give you a diagnosis and treatment. Your GP or psychiatrist may see your voices as a result of an illness and prescribe medication and other treatment.

Your GP should always check to that there are no physical reasons why

you are hearing voices before you are prescribed medication or referred to a psychiatrist. For example they should check that you don't have a high temperature and are delirious, or if it's a side effect of any medication you're taking

Different doctors may have different approaches. You can always visit another GP or get a second opinion if you are not satisfied. See *The Mind guide to seeking help for a mental health problem* for more information on getting the treatment that is right for you.

You might find getting a diagnosis is a positive experience because you find that a diagnosis helps you make sense of your experiences or you feel like you have support in place to help you when things are difficult

However, you may find this sort of support more challenging because seeing your voices as something to be 'treated' may make you feel powerless to control or manage your voices yourself; or being diagnosed with a mental health problem may make you feel worried, as though you can never recover

Talking treatments

There are different types of talking treatments but they are all designed to give you space to explore difficult feelings and experiences with a trained professional.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy can help if you feel your voices are related to traumatic experiences. A psychotherapist may be able to help you:

- identify why the voices say what they say
- think about what makes you hear voices
- find better ways of coping with them
- learn to control your voices

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See Mind's booklet *Making sense of talking treatments* for more information

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT can help you deal with how the voices make you feel and think about yourself without always going into the underlying reasons for them. CBT may help you:

- reduce your anxiety about the voices
- help you stand up to them
- help you gain control over your voices

You may be offered a type of CBT for psychosis call CBTp - although this is not usually used to treat hearing voices specifically. CBTp helps you to think about the beliefs you have about your voices and how these beliefs affect your experience of hearing voices.



See Mind's online guide *Making sense of CBT* for more information.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)

MBCT is a type of therapy that combines mindfulness and CBT. It may help you:

- focus on what is happening around you when your voices are distracting you
- help you manage how you feel about your voices and what has happened to you in the past.

See Mind's online guide *Making sense of mindfulness* for more information.

 *Talking therapies work well for me and are essential for improving my coping mechanisms.* 

Medication

If your voices are very troubling and you have been referred to a psychiatrist, they are likely to prescribe an antipsychotic drug. These drugs may:

- stop the voices or make them less frightening for you
- make you feel indifferent to the voices, even though you can still hear them
- make the voices quieter and less intrusive, so you feel calmer and less upset by them

Medication may be something you need only in the short term, allowing you to learn other ways of coping with the voices so that you then no longer need drugs.

See our online guide *Making sense of antipsychotics* for general information about this type of medication, and details about specific drugs.

How can other people help

This section is for family and friends who want to support someone who is hearing voices.

If someone you care about hears voices you might find it hard to understand what they are experiencing. You might not know how to help. But there are lots of positive things you can do to support them.

- **Accept that their experience of the voices is real.** Everyone will have a unique experience of hearing voices and will think about their voices in different ways. You can help by accepting their experience as real - even if you find it hard to understand.

- **Try not to make judgments** about what hearing voices means for them. Some people don't talk about their voices because they are worried their friends and family won't understand or will assume they are seriously ill.
- **Learn their triggers.** Learn more about whether there are particular situations or experiences that trigger their voices.
- **Remember they are still the person you've always known.** Hearing voices doesn't change who they are.

●● *My family and friends didn't judge me which I think made it a lot easier for me to deal with.* ●●

- **Ask them what would help.** Avoid making assumptions about what they find difficult. Different people want different support at different times. Sometimes the best thing to do can be to ask them what, if anything, you can do to help.
- **Reassure them that they are not alone.** Lots of people who hear voices don't realise that other people do too. It can also help to reassure them that hearing voices does not necessarily mean that they are ill. There are lots of reasons why people hear voices.
- **Encourage them to talk about their experience.** They may want to talk to you or they may feel safer talking to a doctor, support worker or someone from a support group.

●● *Eventually I did confide in one of my closest friends. He told me without any drama that it was a fairly normal reaction to a highly stressful situation.* ●●

- **Learn more about the experience of hearing voices** and help challenge stigma. 'Why do I hear voices?' on p.5 and 'What's it like to live with voices?' on p.6 might be a good place to start.
- **Help them seek treatment and support if they want it.** See our page on how to support someone to seek help for more information. But remember that not everyone who hears voices will want, or need,

to seek additional treatment or support.

- Take care of yourself. Your mental health is important too and looking after someone else could put a strain on your wellbeing. See Mind's online guides *How to cope as a carer*, *How to manage stress* and *How to improve and maintain your wellbeing* for more information on how to look after yourself.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm)
email: info@mind.org.uk
text: 86463
web: mind.org.uk
Details of local Minds, other local services and Mind's Legal Line. Language Line is available for languages other than English.

Elefriends

web: elefriends.org.uk

A safe, supportive online community where you can listen, be heard and share your experiences with others.

Hearing Voices Network

tel: 0114 271 8210
web: hearing-voices.org

Information and support for people who hear voices or have other unusual perceptions.

Intervoice

web: intervoiceonline.org

International community for people who hear voices

Rethink Mental Illness

tel: 0300 5000 927
web: rethink.org

Information, advice and support for people with mental health problems.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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email: dons@mind.org.uk
web: mind.org.uk/donate

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(National Association for Mental Health)
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fax: 020 8522 1725
web: mind.org.uk

Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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