

# how to



cope with  
hearing voices

## **How to cope with hearing voices**

Hearing voices is a more common experience than many people realise, and is not necessarily a sign of mental ill-health. This booklet is for anyone who hears voices and wants to understand why, and what things might help if their voices are a problem.

## Contents

What are voices and who hears them?	4
Why do people hear voices?	5
How can hearing voices affect me?	6
My voices are a problem: what can I do?	7
What support is available?	11
Will I ever get rid of my voices?	14
How can friends and family help?	15
Useful contacts	16

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# What are voices and who hears them?

Hearing voices is often thought of as a symptom of a serious mental illness. But research on the experiences of the general population shows that lots of people hear voices, and the majority of them are not mentally unwell. It is a common human experience.

Hearing a voice when no-one is present with you, or which other people with you cannot hear, is considered to be a hallucination. 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. You may also see things that others can't see. You may experience touch, smell or taste sensations which you cannot account for in usual everyday ways. Some people may not realise that many other people do not have such experiences.

People have many different experiences of hearing voices. Here are some examples:

- It's quite common to hear your name called when there is no-one with you. You may look round to see where the voice came from, and wonder why you heard it, but if nothing else happens you will probably just shrug it off as 'just one of those things'.
- You may hear or see things as you are falling asleep.
- You may experience the voices as being in your head, or you may feel that they are coming from outside and heard through your ears like other sounds.
- You may believe that you are hearing other people's thoughts.
- The voices may be louder or more frequent if you are feeling stressed.
- You may experience unkind and threatening voices that tell you to do dangerous or unacceptable things or try to control you.
- You may hear a kind supportive voice.
- Sometimes there may be more than one voice and they may talk or argue with each other.

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## Why do people hear voices?

It is still very common for people to assume that if you hear voices, you must have schizophrenia. And, if you hear unpleasant and disturbing voices and see a doctor about them, you are quite likely to be given a diagnosis of psychosis. Sometimes these are the reasons, but there are many other explanations for voices too.

- **Voices as you fall asleep or wake up** – these are called hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations, and are to do with your brain being partly in a dreaming state. The voice is likely to call your name, or say something very brief, or you may hear other brief sounds such as a telephone ringing. You may also see strange things, or misinterpret things you can see, such as seeing a coat on a hook as a person standing in the doorway. These experiences usually stop as soon as you are fully awake.
- **Lack of sleep**
- **Hunger** – you may hear voices if you are very hungry, or if you have anorexia nervosa and are starving yourself.
- **Physical illness** – if you have a high temperature, and have become delirious, you may hear voices, and see or say strange things.
- **Drugs** – you may hear or see things as a result of taking certain street drugs, or as a side effect of some prescribed drugs. You may 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. You may also feel that they are with you, even though you cannot see them. This experience is very common, and can be comforting, especially in the early days of bereavement.
- **Abuse or bullying** – if you have experienced abuse, you may hear the voice of the person who abused you, undermining you and ordering you to harm yourself or to do things you know to be wrong. This is especially so if you experienced the abuse in childhood, at an age when you had not learned the coping skills you needed to protect yourself, or you were never given any chance to learn such skills.

- **Other traumatic experiences** – you may hear voices as a result of other traumas, such as accidents or major natural disasters. You may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Hearing several different voices may be associated with traumatic experiences, and may also be associated with a dissociative disorder: it may be a way of coping with trauma by separating yourself from it. (See Mind's booklets *Understanding post-traumatic stress disorder* and *Understanding dissociative disorders*.)
- **Spiritual experiences** – some people experience a voice as part of a spiritual experience. You may experience your voice as that of an angel, a mystic or sage. This may be a very special experience for you, and you may feel that it helps you to make sense of your life. Or you may feel that you are possessed by an evil spirit and that is the voice you can hear.
- **Mental health problems** – you may hear voices if you have a diagnosis of psychosis, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, or if you are severely depressed. (See Mind's booklets *Understanding psychotic experiences*, *Understanding schizophrenia*, *Understanding bipolar disorder*, and *Understanding depression*.)

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## How can hearing voices affect me?

You may hear voices and be quite used to them – they may not trouble you at all.

If you hear friendly and supportive voices, you may welcome them and would miss them if they stopped. They may make you feel better and encourage you.

If you hear voices which are unkind, tell you to do things that are wrong, or criticise and undermine you, you are likely to be very upset by them.

You may feel very threatened by the voices and feel forced to do as they say. You may feel they are controlling you, and stopping you from doing

things that you would really like to do. They probably interrupt your thoughts, make it very difficult to concentrate or hold a conversation, and may become very difficult to tolerate, generally dominating your life.

If you have been hearing unpleasant and critical voices for a long time, and felt dominated and controlled by them, you will probably have very low feelings of self-worth. You may feel that you can't even think your own thoughts and you deserve to be shouted at and it's impossible for you to stand up to anyone, never mind your voices.

Your psychiatrist may see voices as the result of an illness, and not as a result of difficult experiences which have made you feel powerless. If you are told that you have a medical condition, and given a diagnosis and a medical treatment that 'treats' the voices or ignores them, this may reinforce your feelings of powerlessness. Being told that you have a serious mental illness which may affect you for the rest of your life may make you feel that you can never recover.

You may also be very reluctant to talk about your voices, even to your friends and family, because you are worried that you will be seen as seriously ill.

Voices become a problem not so much because you hear them, but because of your relationship with them.

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## **My voices are a problem: what can I do?**

### **Get support**

If you are finding hearing voices a problem, then learning to understand your voices can help. But it is much better to do this with support than to try and do it on your own.

The first thing to do is to find someone who also accepts that your voices are real, and is able to support you. This may be a hearing voices group,

another person who hears voices, or it may be a mental health worker, counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist. It doesn't matter who they are, as long as they accept your voices and understand what you are doing. To help you think about who you might want to support you, see 'What support is available?' on p.11.

### Accept what is happening

The main organisation helping people who hear voices is the Hearing Voices Network. (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16). They suggest:

- you need to accept your voices – they are real
- your voices come from you and belong to you
- your voices are related to your life history
- accept yourself as who you are, with your voices.

### Understand your voices

When you have found a safe supported way of working, you can start asking yourself questions, such as:

- What was happening when I first heard voices?
- Where was I?
- How was I feeling at the time?
- What did the voice(s) say?
- What did they sound like? Aggressive or threatening, or pleasant?
- What age were they? A young child, a teenager, an older person?
- Who do the voices represent?
- What problems do the voices represent?

Answering some of these questions may help you to gain an understanding of the voices.

Some people find it helpful to keep a diary of their voices – what they say, tone of voice and so on, and this helps to accept and identify them.



You may be able to identify them as individuals from your past, or as representing yourself at different ages, but they may also be related more indirectly to a traumatic event. You may find, for instance, that what your voices do is stop you from thinking too closely about unhappy or traumatic memories – keeping certain events at a distance.

As you gain more insight into where your voices are coming from in relation to your own history, you should feel more in control of them, and better able to stand up to them. You may even be able to tell them that you don't need them any more and they can go – and find that they do. You may simply develop a better relationship with them so that they no longer interfere with the way you live your life or prevent you from making your own choices.

## **Take control of your voices**

There are other ways that you may be able to get more control of your voices, without necessarily exploring the story behind them in depth.

- You may try and ignore the voices, or block them out or distract yourself, by listening to music on headphones, for example.
- You may agree to have a dialogue with them, or tell them you would like to wait before doing what they say.
- If you have more than one voice and some are helpful and others not, you can ignore the nasty ones and focus on the nice ones.
- You may control them by giving them times when you will listen to them, and times when you will not.
- You may stand up to them – telling them that they have no power over you and ignoring their commands and threats
- If you find yourself losing touch with reality when your voices just won't go away, you can try and 'ground' yourself by taking in your immediate surroundings, or doing a simple task like watering a plant, or washing up. This reminds you to stay with what is really happening and not get taken up with what is going on in your head (see 'Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy' on p.13).

●● *Through various therapies and my own knowledge of my voices, 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.* ●●

### Try out the 'Recovery approach'

The recovery concept in mental health has a different meaning from the normal use of the word 'recovery'. It has developed from the work of the Hearing Voices Network, and means:

- living the very best life you can, with the life experiences you have had, and the consequences of them, even if these are long-term or recurrent mental health problems
- building your resilience and wellbeing, and focusing on the things you can do, rather than those you may no longer be able to do
- making our own choices, and being your own person
- very importantly, maintaining hope.

Recovery is also regarded as a journey rather than a destination, and includes accepting that you may have set-backs. This does not mean you have failed – you are learning more about yourself and what you need to do differently.

Self-esteem is an important element of recovery, and the recovery approach helps you to aim for what is important for you.

In terms of hearing voices, it includes the things mentioned on pp.8-9 about accepting your voices as yours and learning more about them, and changing the power structure between you and your voices. It also means recognising and accepting your own emotions, which may have been hidden in the voices you hear.

You can read more about this on the 'Recovery' pages of the Rethink Mental Illness website (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16).

## Look after yourself

You may find it helpful to take exercise, especially outside in the fresh air, e.g. walking or running in the park or the countryside. Some physical activities, such as gardening, may be part of a recovery programme, and you may enjoy doing them with others.

Sleep is important, and voices may sometimes make it difficult for you to get to sleep. It may be helpful to learn relaxation techniques, or meditation, to help calm your thoughts, or you may find massage or aromatherapy helpful. (See Mind's booklets *How to cope with sleep problems* and *How to manage stress*.)

It is also important to pay attention to your diet. Try to eat regularly, to keep your blood sugar as stable as possible – this can make a lot of difference to your mood and energy levels. It may be helpful to keep a food diary to see if there are any foods which you are sensitive to. (Also see the Mind *Food and mood* poster.)

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## What support is available?

### Support groups

It's very helpful for your recovery if you have people who take an interest in you as a person, and value your abilities and friendship.

A group can:

- **give you a safe space to talk** with others who have similar experiences, and the words you need to talk about them
- **encourage people to help each other** discover their feelings and abilities
- **help you gain insight into your own story** – others may see things you may have not seen yourself, and help you to come to terms with it
- **allow you to help others gain insight into their experiences**
- **help you feel accepted and listened to**
- **be great for your self-esteem**, as you become a valuable and valued member of the group

- **encourage you to make your own choices and decisions** about how you want to live, and get the most out of life. The choices you make may be very basic to begin with – for example, deciding to stay alive. But they may have important implications for what you do next – you may set yourself new goals and develop new relationships.

There are Hearing Voices Network groups, and some voices groups run by local Minds in various parts of England and Wales (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16). There may also be Recovery and Wellbeing services run by your local mental health team in some areas, and your doctor can put you in touch with these.

## Talking treatments

Talking (psychological) treatments may be available through your GP. They should be able to refer you for psychotherapy, counselling or cognitive behaviour therapy, as well as to a psychiatrist or mental health team.

You may also want to look for therapy or counselling yourself. This may be available through a local group such as a local Mind, or a private therapist. This can be expensive, though some have a scale of charges according to your income. (See BACP and BABCP in 'Useful contacts' for lists of practitioners, or contact Mind Infoline to find support in your area. Also see Mind's booklet *Making sense of talking treatments*.)

## Psychotherapy

If you think that your voices are related to traumatic experiences when you were a child or a teenager, or they have started after a more recent traumatic event, you may want to explore this with a psychotherapist or counsellor. They may be able to help you:

- identify why the voices say what they say
- what the triggers are for hearing them
- find better ways of coping with them
- learn to control them rather than feeling that they are controlling you.

Some therapists may use puppets or other representations to help you to understand where your voices are coming from and develop your ability to stand up to them and get them under your control. In some cases they may go completely.

### Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)

CBT may help you to deal with the everyday problems of the voices and how they make you feel and think about yourself, without necessarily going into the underlying reasons why you hear them. The aim of this is to:

- reduce your anxiety about them
- increase your ability to stand up to them
- gain control over them.

(See *Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy* for more information.)

### Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy

This is an approach to wellbeing that involves paying attention to the present moment. It includes taking time to see what is happening around you in a non-judgmental way, and can help you to focus on what is really happening when your voices are distracting you. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is usually done in groups.

### Medication

If your voices are very troubling and you have been referred to a psychiatrist, you are very likely to be prescribed an antipsychotic drug, such as olanzapine or quetiapine.

These types of drugs may either:

- stop the voices or make them less frightening for you
- make you feel indifferent to the voices, so that you are no longer so disturbed by them, even though you can still hear them
- make the voices quieter and less intrusive, making 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.

Antipsychotics may cause significant unpleasant side effects, which you should discuss with your doctor before taking any. For more information, see Mind's booklet *Making sense of antipsychotics*.

### Spiritual help or guidance

If you feel your voices are coming from an external being or another world, you may want to talk to a priest, imam or other spiritual guide. Some psychiatrists will occasionally work with religious or spiritual guides to provide help with your spiritual experiences on an individual basis.

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## Will I ever get rid of my voices?

Some people do get rid of their voices completely. But like many people working with their voices, you may find that they never go completely. However, finding out which treatment approach works best for you can help you to develop a better relationship with your voices, so that you are no longer dominated by them; you hear voices, it's part of who you are, and it's ok.

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## How can friends and family help?

*This section is for friends and family who want to support someone they know who hears voices.*

It can be very upsetting if someone you are close to is hearing voices and is very distressed by them. You can help a lot by:

- accepting that the voices are real
- reassuring them that they are not alone – a lot of people hear voices – and it doesn't necessarily mean they are ill
- encouraging them to get help, either through their doctor or a local self-help group
- helping them to find out what support is available
- being ready to go with them to activities or events if they are anxious about starting something new on their own
- encouraging them to talk about their feelings with someone they feel safe to do this with – which may not be you
- supporting them to make their own choices – even if you would choose something different.

## Useful contacts

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### Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393  
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)  
email: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)  
web: [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)  
Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

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### Bipolar UK

tel: 020 7931 6480  
web: [bipolaruk.org.uk](http://bipolaruk.org.uk)  
Support for people with bipolar disorder and their families and friends.

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### British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel: 0161 705 4304  
web: [babcp.com](http://babcp.com)  
For details of accredited therapists.

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### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel: 01455 883 300  
web: [itsgoodtotalk.org.uk](http://itsgoodtotalk.org.uk)  
For details of local practitioners.

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### Hearing Voices Network

tel: 0114 271 8210  
web: [hearing-voices.org](http://hearing-voices.org)  
Information and support for people who hear voices or have other unusual perceptions.

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### Intervoice

web: [intervoiceonline.org](http://intervoiceonline.org)  
International community for people who hear voices.

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### Mental Health Foundation

tel: 020 7803 1100  
web: [mentalhealth.org.uk](http://mentalhealth.org.uk)  
Research and information for people with mental health problems.



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### Rethink Mental Illness

tel: 0300 5000 927

web: [rethink.org](http://rethink.org)

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

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### Royal College of Psychiatrists

tel: 020 7235 2351

web: [rcpsych.ac.uk](http://rcpsych.ac.uk)

Mental health information, including a booklet on spirituality.

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### Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK,  
Chris, PO Box 90 90

Stirling, FK8 2SA

24-hour helpline: 08457 90 90 90

email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

web: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

Emotional support for anyone in distress.

[illegible]

## 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](http://mind.org.uk) or contact Mind infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

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web: [mind.org.uk/donate](http://mind.org.uk/donate)

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Mind  
(National Association for Mental Health)  
15-19 Broadway  
London E15 4BQ  
tel: 020 8519 2122  
fax: 020 8522 1725  
web: [mind.org.uk](http://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.

**Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393**

**[info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)**

**[mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)**

