

Practical and helpful ideas for carers and family members

- Don't be afraid to talk about voices.
- Encourage the person to set limits with the voices – as they would in any other relationship; eg. only listening at set times. This takes time and practice, but it doesn't work for everyone.
- Encourage the person to challenge the truth of what the voices say – sometimes they lie.
- Encourage the person to join a group and share their experience with others (this will reduce feelings of stigma).
- Ask about the voices – how many do they hear? What gender are they? How old? Are they all frightening or are some of them helpful? Profiling the voices helps to build understanding and control.
- Encourage the person to enlist the support of voices, particularly if they hear positive voices.
- Remember it can be extremely helpful for the person to dialogue with their voices – as long as it doesn't take over everything else.
- Some people hold up a mobile phone when talking to their voices – this is a great way to normalise the experience.
- Remind the person that often what voices say is symbolic rather than literal – this can take some of the fear out of the situation and help to make sense of confusing messages.
- Often voices can be associated with something traumatic in a person's life – and remember, that trauma can mean very different things for different people. Often either the content or the characteristics of the voices will relate to these traumas. If this is the case, encourage and support the person to seek counselling for whatever that trauma may have been.

“Voices are messengers in people's lives – often pointing to issues which need to be resolved.

All too often we try to ‘shoot the messenger’ with medication – without stopping to listen to what the message is and what it is that person really needs.

Don't shoot the messenger!”

Dr Rufus May

What does the Melissa Roberts Foundation do?

The Foundation provides Support, Information, Training and Education for people with lived experience of hearing voices, paranoia and childhood trauma, who, like Mel, are disempowered by their lived experience.

The Foundation's services extend to:

- carers and family
- mental health professionals and organisations
- educational institutions and students
- the general community.

For more information:

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Helpful Hints

For Carers and Family

Information on hearing voices.

Being the carer or family member of someone who hears voices can feel confusing, frightening and isolating. Many carers/family tell us that they receive little information about how to be helpful and feel greatly frustrated by this. This fact sheet aims to provide some practical help in these areas.

Using the philosophy of the hearing voices approach, we recommend two important and fundamental ideas for thinking about voices.

1. Accept that the voices are real

Why? Most importantly, because for the voice hearer, **they are**. Brain imaging studies show that the brain's primary auditory cortex responds in the same way to voices as it does to noises we all can hear.

In other words, it's a real perception. Denying their reality or advising the voice hearer to ignore them promotes denial – whereas acceptance of their reality gives permission to start actively dealing with them.

“Denying the reality of voices is almost like a colour-blind person insisting that red and green are exactly the same colour. It is more helpful and realistic to accept that perceived reality can differ for different people.”

2. Focus on helping the person try to reduce distress, rather than get rid of the voices

The **distress** is the real issue, **not the voices**. In fact, many people who hear voices lead fully-functioning and highly successful lives. Many people hear and focus on their positive voices, while others have developed strategies

to change the power balance with the voices, set strong boundaries with them, or found new ways to interpret and make sense of what the voices say – often to the point where the voices become helpful guides or indicators of life issues.

“In mental health, we used to think that talking about suicide with clients would increase the risks of someone acting on their suicidal thoughts. We now know that the best thing we can do is ask about suicide and support the person to talk.

It is not that different with voices. Many people still mistakenly think that talking about voices will increase the chance of someone becoming lost in their psychosis. The reverse is true. This is a deeply significant and often highly distressing experience which people need to share and explore. Not to do so, is simply to leave the person alone in a private torment.

It may be more comfortable for non-voice hearers to avoid opening up these conversations – but it is not in the interest of real recovery.”

Perhaps though, the most important message we have for carers is that of self-care.

No person can do the recovery work for another, no matter how much we love them. And carers/family – just like mental health workers – need to be sure to have adequate supports for themselves, people with whom they can debrief, an ability to let go and a healthy, balanced life.

Learning from those who know best...

What is different about voice hearers who live well with their voices?

- Higher self-esteem
- An explanatory framework for the voices
- More likely to discuss the voices with others
- Communicate more often with the voices
- More social and supportive connections
- Ability to set limits with the voices.

“It helped me enormously to realise that hearing voices is quite a normal experience, that one can talk about it and that the voices express what is happening to me . . .

I no longer feel ashamed about the voices and I can even talk with my family about it.

I can do it because I have changed my mind about it being my fault.

I had to say to myself over and over again the opposite: I was not to blame”.