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FOUNDATION



## HEARING VOICES COPING STRATEGIES

AS COMPILED BY THE MANCHESTER HEARING VOICES GROUP



*The following are suggestions for coping with the experiences of hearing voices, and seeing visions and having tactile sensations. It is hoped some of these ideas can help you, or someone you care about, towards living positively with these experiences and to maintain a sense of ownership over them.*

**Remember that you are not alone: Research shows that 4% of people hear voices, this is the same number as have asthma. Voice hearers throughout history have included a great many influential people: religious prophets, doctors and psychologists, philosophers, artists, poets, explorers and politicians.**

### **Be prepared**

Some people get a warning sign that the voices are about to start. For example, they know what can trigger the voices or they hear another noise like whistling or an extra heartbeat. This can be used as a positive thing because you are forewarned. You can then learn to use relaxation and breathing techniques to calm right down. Decide if you want to listen to them, if you don't and you hear the whistles, distract yourself.

## **Don't believe what the voices tell you**

This can be difficult and takes a lot of determination, but you don't have to believe or do what the voices tell you. Be aware that sometimes the voices become nastier and more persistent when you stand up to them. This can be a sign they know their days are numbered.

## **Use selective listening**

Some voice hearers find they hear positive as well as negative voices or that the same voices say both helpful and unhelpful things, so they develop their skills of selective listening, learning to take what is useful from the voices and ignoring the rest. For example: "I need to get to the shops before they close". There is a difference between this speech pattern and "We want you to go to the shops before they close". It is often the subtle switches between reminding yourself of something and interacting with the voices. Change statements like "We want you out of the house now" to "I'm going out".

## **Take care of yourself**

Taking a regular bath or shower can be very therapeutic. This can be a challenge for some people when they are feeling low but it can be a great way to pamper yourself. Try playing relaxing music when you are taking a bath.

## **Use stepping stones**

Set small goals to start with, such as getting out for a certain amount of time each day. Remember to reward yourself for your progress.

## **Being busy**

Keeping busy to distract yourself from the voices has proved useful for some people. For other people it has just been tiring and restrictive. Experiment with different activities and find what works for you.

## **Hearing Voices Groups**

Going to your nearest hearing voices support group can mean that you have time in the company of others who truly understand what it means to live with the experience of hearing voices. This can create a sense of fellowship and shared solidarity between group members which can minimize the sense of isolation that many voice hearers feel. Many people have found that the onset of voices was preceded by a traumatic incident in their lives. Groups can offer a safe place to explore these experiences.

## **Structure and routine**

Many voice hearers have discovered that planning, combined with good self-awareness, can be very helpful. For example, a person who tends to hear the voices in the afternoon can plan to get their cooking and cleaning done in the morning, and then rest in the afternoon.

## **Social support network**

It is useful to build up a network of people in your life who can give you support at different levels of intensity at different times and in different ways. Your partner, siblings, Helplines, friends, relations and your doctor may be included.

## **Educating others on how best to help you**

It is useful to develop your communication skills so you can describe to concerned people how best it is they can help you. These should be people in your life who will want to support you in coping with your experiences, both in a professional and personal capacity. Give clear descriptions of what you find helpful and why, and how others can help you.

## **Develop your rules of engagement**

Many people have increased their abilities to be assertive with their voices. This can involve making a contract with the voices. Saying something to them like “I am too busy to talk just now. “I will listen to you if you come back at 7 pm when I have finished my dinner”. Sometimes the voices stick with these contracts. Some people find ignoring the voices more helpful. Others have found just shouting and swearing at the voices makes them feel better.

## **Use a mobile**

Some people find that if the voices get nasty in public places they want to scream and shout at them, but this can be embarrassing. Try carrying a mobile phone or a realistic toy that is cheaper for these occasions – this way you can shout at the voices without attracting the attention of other people. This will also work if you find a public phone you can use if you need to.

## **Get creative**

Writing about, drawing or sculpting what you see and hear can be helpful to get a handle on your experiences. It can also help distract you away from the voices. You can develop your creative potential and gain a sense of achievement. It can also be very relaxing.

## **Hobbies**

If you feel up to going, common interest groups can be a great way to meet people and to learn. If that feels too much, drop-in centres can be a good way to jump-start getting back out again and meeting people.

## **Music**

This is a popular coping strategy. Different styles of music can be helpful or unhelpful to different individuals. Learn what you find the most therapeutic. Some people have found that listening to music whilst wearing headphones can be a useful distraction from voices.

## **Journals**

Keeping a diary of what the voices say to you and keeping a journal of your feelings can be a very helpful way to develop your self-awareness and find patterns of what makes you feel bad and what triggers your voices. Some people find that when they are with a helpful professional like a psychologist or a counsellor they may want to talk about their experiences, but find it hard to find the words. Some people have found that giving their diary to the professional can be a helpful way of explaining what life is like for them. Other people just like to write their problems out and not read what they have written, or just thrown it away. Be aware that what you write is your private property and keep it in a safe place. Do not give it to anyone unless you choose to of your own free will.

## **Religious activity**

Some people have found spiritual activities useful for helping them to live with their voices. Be cautious though of cult groups or people that may try to pressure you in to becoming more involved than you want to. The first time you go to a new place of worship take a friend with you.

## Praying and prayers of others

Some voice hearers have specifically described the benefits of praying and also having others pray for them in their struggles.

## Change the picture

If you see frightening images forming on carpets or curtains for example it can be possible to try and change the shapes of them to something neutral like a tree or flower.

## TV and radio

Some people find TV or a radio a useful distraction. Others find these interact with their voices and cause distress. But turning them off because of the voices can be allowing the voices to control you and your time. If you find that certain words or events on TV or radio trigger your voices or very difficult emotions try changing the channel as an alternative to turning them off. If it gets too bad then you can turn off. For people whose voices make it hard to concentrate on reading, TV or radio, try children's books or programs to help build concentration.

## Medication

Finding the right kind of medication for you can be helpful, but it can take time and be a process of trial and error to get it right. Finding the right dosage of medication can be a very important factor in determining how successful it will be for you.

## Read and learn about hearing voices

Learn all you can about others who have had the experience. Useful books include "Accepting Voices" by Marius Romme and Sandra Escher. Also very helpful is "Working with Voices: Victim to Victor" by Ron Coleman and Mike Smith. Ron is a voice hearer who has been through the psychiatric system and survived to write this useful book with nurse Mike Smith.

## Adrenalin rushes

Some people like horror or action movies because of the climax of the film and the adrenalin rush. It gives them a distraction from the voices. If this works for you then be aware that such an adrenalin rush can make it harder to relax when you want to go to bed so you could use this strategy in the day and try to avoid it during the night.

## Alternative complementary therapies

These are used to support or replace conventional medicines. There are a great range available including massage and acupuncture and many people find them helpful.

## Self-injury or self-harm

These have sometimes been described as coping strategies for the distress of hearing voices. If you use self-injury to cope with your voices, consider alternative forms of expression, or more controlled self-injury like wearing a rubber band on your wrist and pinching it when you feel the impulse to harm yourself. Drawing on yourself with a red felt tip pen can be an alternative to self-harm, as can squeezing ice on your hands.

## **Being aware of substance use**

Some people have found that using street drugs or alcohol has such a negative impact on their voices that they choose to abstain. Beware of the risks associated with alcohol and drugs and how these could, or do, influence your voices.

## **Use visualisation**

Using creative or positive visualisation, i.e. imagining how you would like to be in various scenarios, can be a powerful helping tool. If you read and see the story in your head as you read you can use your imagination to create and manipulate these mental pictures. Construct a room in your head that only you hold the key to and use it to lock up your voices.

## **Celebrate**

Reward yourself with some helpful treat each time you take control. When voices become less frequent people can find they are left with a void to fill. When this happens, you can become anxious. The anxiety can invite the voices back. Be aware of these times, think positively, stay in control and use your social supports.