

# Hearing voices

Hearing voices is a common symptom of a mental illness, but not everyone that hears voices are unwell. This factsheet looks at what it can be like to hear voices, why you might hear voices and how to deal with them.



KEY POINTS

- Around one in 10 of us hear voices.
- Another term for hearing voices is auditory hallucinations.
- Hearing voices can sometimes be positive.
- Sometimes these voices can be negative and upsetting.
- Research shows that hearing voices is not always a sign of mental illness.
- Treatments for distressing voices can include medication, talking therapies and peer support.

**This factsheet covers:**

1. [What does the term 'hearing voices' mean?](#)
2. [What is it like to hear voices and how is this condition diagnosed?](#)
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## 1. What does the term 'hearing voices' mean?

Your doctor or support worker may call hearing voices an 'auditory hallucination'. A hallucination is where you might see, hear, taste, smell or feel something that exists only in your mind.

The experience of hearing voices can be different for everyone. People who are not unwell can hear voices.

The voice might be one you know or one you've never heard. It can be female, male, in a different language, or have a different accent to the one you're familiar with. The voice may whisper or shout. You might just hear occasional words or phrases. You might hear voices every now and then, or you might hear them all of the time. You may hear several voices at once.

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## 2. What is it like to hear voices and how is this condition diagnosed?

Hearing voices can be positive. However, they can be negative and upsetting. They can threaten you and say hurtful or cruel things about you or someone you know. This can be frightening.

You may find that your voices change at different times. They may become more distressing during difficult or stressful times.

### Stevie's story

I've heard voices since I was young. They get worse if I'm worried about something or if something bad happens. I usually hear the same voice but sometimes random voices shout things. It makes it difficult to sleep or concentrate, although I do find that listening to music or watching TV sometimes helps. I didn't tell anyone about the voices for a long time. As time went on I decided to speak to more people and found that doing so has been a turning point in accepting them.

### Do many people hear voices?

Up to one in ten people hear voices. Not everybody who hears voices gets a medical diagnosis. Hearing voices is not as rare as we used to think.<sup>1</sup>

You can hear voices without having a mental illness. Research shows that many people hear voices or have other hallucinations, It is not always a sign of being unwell.<sup>2</sup>

In some cultures, hearing voices is considered normal.<sup>3</sup> Some people have spiritual reasons or other beliefs that explain voices. There are different reasons why someone might hear voices, and you may have your own explanation for yours.

## Getting help

You may experience voices which are positive, insightful or comforting and feel you don't need any help. However, if they are having a negative effect on your life you should think about getting support.

You may hear a voice that tells you to do something bad such as harm yourself or someone else. If this happens you should tell someone you trust or a doctor.

If your voices are becoming difficult to cope with, you should speak to your GP. They will be able to offer treatment options and coping strategies.

If you hear voices, your doctor might give you a diagnosis of 'psychosis'.

You can have hallucinations or psychosis if you have a mental illness such as:

- Schizophrenia
- Schizoaffective disorder
- Bipolar disorder
- Personality disorder

Up to 9 out of 10 people who have schizophrenia hear voices. Up to 8 out of 10 people who have bipolar disorder hear voices.<sup>4</sup>

You can find more information in our factsheets '**Bipolar disorder**', '**Schizophrenia**' and '**Schizoaffective disorder**' which you can download for free from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org).

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### 3. What are the different kinds of voices experienced?

The experience of hearing voices can be different for everyone. Hearing voices does not mean you are unwell.

There are different types of auditory hallucinations. You can hear music, animal noises, background noise like people chatting, people talking directly to you or about you. There are all different types. If you think you are hearing something that other people can't hear then you should consider talking to a professional or someone you trust.

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### 4. What causes someone to hear voices?

There are different reasons why some people hear voices.<sup>5</sup> One suggestion is that the brain makes your thoughts sound like voices coming from somewhere else.<sup>6</sup>

You may hear voices as a way to cope with difficult emotions and traumatic experiences. This may be part of a dissociative disorder.<sup>7</sup>

Other things can make you hear voices or make your voices worse. These include:

- stress, anger or anxiety,<sup>8</sup>
- drugs and alcohol,<sup>9, 10</sup>
- serious physical illness or following an operation,
- grief, divorce or separation,
- old or recent trauma, and
- extreme hunger or tiredness.

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## 5. How are they treated?

If you speak to your doctor about hearing voices, they may suggest some of the following treatment options.

### Medication

Antipsychotic medication can help with hearing voices.<sup>11</sup> They may not make symptoms go away but can make voices seem distant or less noticeable. They do not work for everyone and can have side effects. You

might need to try more than one drug before you find one that helps. You can find more information in our factsheets '**Antipsychotics**' and '**Medication – Choice and Managing Problems**' which you can download for free from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org).

### Talking therapies

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a type of talking therapy that can help if you hear voices. CBT can help you to manage your voices and to notice any patterns.<sup>12</sup> This can help you learn what triggers the voices and also how to ignore them.

Voices may say things that you think about yourself. CBT can help you be more positive about yourself which can help lessen your negative voices. Stress can trigger voices. CBT can help you find ways to deal with your stress.

CBT can be combined with Mindfulness. This is a form of meditation which helps you to focus on the present moment. This may help you to identify what your voices are distracting you from, in a safe environment.

If you have experienced childhood trauma, your voices may be part of your way of dealing with this. This can be called disassociation. This is something which can be treated with talking therapy. The therapist will help you to understand the root causes of your voices. They will explore ways to over-come and control difficult voices.

You could ask your GP about talking therapy. If you are under a mental health team, speak to your psychiatrist or care coordinator instead.

Although more and more professionals are using therapy to help with hearing voices, it may depend on what is available in your area.

You can find more information in our factsheets '**Talking Therapies**' and '**Complementary and alternative treatments**' which you can download for free from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org).

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## **6. What treatment should the NHS offer me?**

NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) recommend that everyone experiencing psychosis should be offered antipsychotic medication and talking therapy.

Health professionals may offer you 'family intervention'. This is a type of talking therapy. You and your carer and family will do this therapy together. It looks at education, support and what treatment will work for you.<sup>13</sup>

NICE also recommend art therapy to treat on-going psychotic symptoms.<sup>14</sup>

If you continue to hear voices, you should ask your doctor to do a medication review. You might need to try a few different medications before you find the right medication and dosage for you.

Your doctor may refer you to specialist support services such as community mental health team (CMHT), or home treatment team (HTT).

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## **7. What if I am not happy with my care or treatment?**

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

If you are unhappy with your care or treatment, you could call your local PALS. They can try to help answer your questions about the complaints procedure. You can find PALS' details at [www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Patient-advice-and-liaison-services-\(PALS\)/LocationSearch/363](http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Patient-advice-and-liaison-services-(PALS)/LocationSearch/363).

### **Advocacy**

An advocate is independent from mental health services. They can help you to voice your opinion and resolve problems. They may be able to help you to write letters or go to appointments or meetings with you.

### **Diagnosis**

If you are unhappy with your diagnosis, you could ask for a second opinion. You do not have a legal right to a second opinion, but it is important to ask if it is important to you.

## Complaints

If you cannot resolve the problem, you can make a complaint to have your concerns investigated in more detail.

You can find more information about:

- Advocacy
- Complaints
- Second Opinions

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for the information to be sent to you.

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## 8. What are the self care and management techniques?

People deal with voices in a different ways. It is important to find a way that works for you. You might need to try different things before finding something that works.

### Talking to others or joining groups

Speaking to other people who hear voices may help you to accept and understand the voices you hear. This may help you feel less alone and boost your self-confidence. Stress can make voices worse. Talking about your voices to other voice hearers may help to reduce feeling stressed about having voices.

The Hearing Voices Network gives people the chance to talk about hearing voices. It offers practical help and support. You can search for a local group in your area. You can find their details in the 'Useful contacts' section of this factsheet.

### Taking control of the voices

When you hear voices you could talk back. Some people find this helps to take control. You might be worried about talking back in public. Some people pretend to use the phone. You may find it helps to control when you engage with your voices. You could set a time each day to listen to and answer the voices.

If you hear more than one voice, try to focus on the positive ones.

Some people find that listening to or talking back to their voices can make them worse. Listening to music, the radio or an audio-book may help you focus on something else.

Concentrating on a task such as a household chore or hobby can help to distract you from your voices.

You could keep a diary of your voices. This could help you keep an eye on how often they happen. You may notice if anything you are doing is

making them worse. This can help you find new ways of coping with them. It may help when talking about it with your therapist.<sup>15</sup>

Researchers have been looking into how a new computer based treatment may help with treatment resistant auditory hallucination.<sup>16,17</sup> This treatment is known as avatar therapy. In this therapy you create a character and pick a voice from a database which is like the one you hear. The therapist can control the avatar using special software. So far it seems that it works for some people. They need to do more research into it to make sure it does before they offer it to people. You can read about the study on if you follow the link below. You can keep up to date with what is happening with it.

**Avatar Therapy UCL webpage:** [www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/project/avtherapy/](http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/project/avtherapy/)

### **Peer support**

Your doctor may offer you peer support. Peer support is when you work with someone who is trained in how to best support you. They will have experienced psychosis or schizophrenia in their life. They should be able to offer advice and support with:

- side effects,
- recognising and coping with symptoms,
- what to do in a crisis,
- meeting other people who can support you, and recovery.

### **Self help**

Health professionals may offer you help to manage your condition on your own. Managing your condition on your own is called a self-management programme.

You can try some of the suggestions below to manage or cope with upsetting or negative voices:

- Speak to a supportive, friend, family member or someone else who hears voices.
- Try relaxation techniques and breathing exercises.
- Use complementary therapy such as meditation, reflexology or aromatherapy.
- Stick to a sleep pattern, eat well and look after yourself.
- Keep a diary of what the voices say and how they make you feel.
- Set small goals such as going out for a small amount of time everyday. Reward yourself when you achieve a goal.
- Do a little exercise every day such as walking, swimming, yoga or cycling.
- Start a hobby, activity or volunteering.
- Treat yourself to hot baths or going for a massage.
- Try visualisation to control voices.

You can get some self help online. Below are some sites you can use.

### **Get self help**

This has worksheets to help with voices and paranoia. One of them is the ABC of Voices which helps you write out what triggered the voice, what you think about it and what it makes you feel. These can be useful if you have had some talking therapies already. It may be hard to do this on your own and it may make you feel worse. They have an Early Warning Signs for Psychosis worksheet that will let you write down what the signs are. You can keep this to help you manage if you are getting unwell. You can share it with people close to you so they know what to look for. They have a whole booklet called Personal Recovery & Maintenance plan which you can fill in. You should always discuss these with your GP or mental health service if want to do these.

**Website :** [www.get.gg/psychosis.htm](http://www.get.gg/psychosis.htm)

### **Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust**

This NHS trust has a lot of self help materials on a different areas including hearing voices.

**Telephone:** 0191 223 2545

**Email:** [pic@ntw.nhs.uk](mailto:pic@ntw.nhs.uk)

**Website:** [www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp)

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## **9. What risks and complications can voices cause?**

It can be common to hear negative, critical voices or unkind voices. This can have an impact on your sense of self worth and motivation. Voices can interrupt the thought process making concentration difficult. They can be overwhelming and intrusive, which can make it difficult to communicate or focus on activities. This can lead to social isolation. Intrusive voices can interrupt sleep leading to insomnia and additional health problems.

Sometimes voices can be demanding instructing you to do things you don't want to. These are known as 'command' voices. In extreme cases voices can instruct people to harm themselves or others. The stress, isolation and associated with hearing voices can also increase the risk of suicide.

If you experience any of these problems, speak to your GP, call 999 or attend a local Accident and Emergency.

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## **10. Information for carers, friends and relatives**

### **Support for you**

If you are a carer, friend or relative of someone living with PTSD, you can get support.



You could get in touch with carer support groups or sibling support groups. You can search for local groups in your area or the Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service can search for you.

You can ask your local authority for a carer's assessment if you need more practical support to help care for someone.

As a carer you should be involved in decisions about care planning. There are rules about information sharing and confidentiality which may make it difficult for you to get all the information you need in some circumstances.

You can find out more information about:

- Carers' Assessments and Support Planning
- Confidentiality and information sharing – for carers, friends and family
- Welfare benefits for carers

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or contact 0121 522 7007 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

### **Supporting the person you care for**

You might find it easier to support someone who hears voices if you understand their symptoms, treatment and self management skills. You can use this information to support and encourage them to get help and stay well.

You should also be aware of what you can do if you are worried about someone's mental state or risk of self harm. You should have details of their mental health team and also discuss a crisis plan with them.

You can find out more information about:

- Supporting someone with a mental illness
- Getting help in a Crisis
- Helping someone with suicidal thoughts
- Responding to unusual behaviours

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or contact 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

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### **The Hearing Voices Network (HVN)**

HVN work with people who hear voices. It gives information and support through its website, telephone helpline and self help groups across the country.

**Telephone:** 0114 271 8210

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

**Email:** [nhvn@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:nhvn@hotmail.co.uk)

**Web:** [www.hearing-voices.org](http://www.hearing-voices.org)

### **Mental Health Care**

This is a website that gives information on hallucinations, including hearing voices. This website includes useful information (including videos) on treatments for hearing voices. The updates are currently limited to recommendations from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

**Website:** [www.mentalhealthcare.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealthcare.org.uk)

### **Intervoice**

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

**Email:** [info@intervoiceonline.org](mailto:info@intervoiceonline.org)

**Website:** [www.intervoiceonline.org](http://www.intervoiceonline.org)

### **Voices network**

This is a London wide project supporting children and young people who experience voices. They also offer advice and support for carers, family members and professionals.

**Telephone:** 020 7911 0822

**Email:** [info@voicecollective.co.uk](mailto:info@voicecollective.co.uk)

**Website:** [www.voicecollective.co.uk](http://www.voicecollective.co.uk)



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<sup>1</sup> The British Psychological Society Research Digest. *Psychosis isn't always pathological*. [www.bps-research-digest.blogspot.com/2011/10/psychosis-isnt-always-pathological.html](http://www.bps-research-digest.blogspot.com/2011/10/psychosis-isnt-always-pathological.html) [Accessed December 2015]

<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> See reference 2

<sup>4</sup> M Mental Healthcare Care. *Voices and other hallucinations*. [www.mentalhealthcare.org.uk/voices\\_and\\_other\\_hallucinations](http://www.mentalhealthcare.org.uk/voices_and_other_hallucinations) [Accessed December 2015]

<sup>5</sup> Durham University. *Hearing the voice*. [www.dur.ac.uk/hearingthevoice/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/hearingthevoice/) [Accessed Dec 2015]

<sup>6</sup> As note 4

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Moskowitz, PHD and Dirk Corstens, M.D. *Auditory hallucinations: Psychotic symptom or dissociative experience?* [www.dirkcorstens.com/hearing-voices-and-dissociation](http://www.dirkcorstens.com/hearing-voices-and-dissociation) [Accessed January 2016]

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Turkington. *Back to Life, Back to Normality: Cognitive Therapy, Recovery and Psychosis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2009

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<sup>9</sup>Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Alcohol: Our favourite drug*.  
[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/alcoholourfavouriteDrug.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/alcoholourfavouriteDrug.aspx) [Accessed December 2015]

<sup>10</sup> See reference 3

<sup>11</sup> See reference 2

<sup>12</sup> See reference 2

<sup>13</sup> NICE Guidance qs80 *Psychosis and schizophrenia in adults*:  
[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs80/chapter/quality-statement-3-family-intervention#source-guidance-3](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs80/chapter/quality-statement-3-family-intervention#source-guidance-3)

<sup>14</sup> NICE Guidance CG178 *Psychosis and schizophrenia in adults: prevention and management*  
[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG178/ifp/chapter/Treatment-options](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG178/ifp/chapter/Treatment-options)

<sup>15</sup> See reference 3

<sup>16</sup> Leff, J et al. *Computer-assisted therapy for medication-resistant auditory hallucinations: proof-of-concept study*. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*. Jun 2013; 202(6): pp 428-433.

<sup>17</sup> NHS Choices. *Avatars may help control 'voices' in schizophrenia*  
[www.nhs.uk/news/2013/05May/Pages/Avatars-may-help-control-voices-in-schizophrenia.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/news/2013/05May/Pages/Avatars-may-help-control-voices-in-schizophrenia.aspx) [Accessed January 2016]

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This factsheet is available  
in large print.



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## Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

**Phone 0300 5000 927**

**Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm  
(excluding bank holidays)**

**Email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)**

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### Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

**Drop us a line at:** [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

**or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:**

RAIS  
PO Box 17106  
Birmingham B9 9LL

**or call us on 0300 5000 927.**

We're open 9:30am to 4pm  
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



**Leading the way to a better  
quality of life for everyone  
affected by severe mental illness.**

For further information  
on Rethink Mental Illness  
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 [twitter.com/rethink\\_](https://twitter.com/rethink_)

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

### Need more help?

Go to **[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)** for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

### Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

### Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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