

Hearing Voices

Explains what it is like to hear voices, where to go for help if you need it, and what others can do to support someone who is struggling with hearing voices.

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<https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/2938/hearing-voices-2018.pdf>*

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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 or simply find them irritating or distracting, while others find them frightening or intrusive.

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 many of them are not mentally unwell. It's a relatively common human experience.

"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. For example, 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** 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** - [sleep problems](#) 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 [recreational drugs](#) or as a side effect of some prescribed drugs. You might also have these experiences when you are coming off drugs.
- **Stress or worry** - you may hear voices while feeling very [stressed](#), anxious or worried.
- **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 start hearing voices after being abused or bullied. This can include hearing the voice of someone who abused you being unkind or threatening or ordering you to harm yourself or do things that you know are wrong.
- **Other traumatic experiences** - you may hear voices as a result of other traumas, which can be associated with [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) 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 as a symptom of some mental health problems, including [psychosis](#), [schizophrenia](#), [bipolar disorder](#), schizoaffective 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 is it like to live with voices?

Although your experience of living with voices will be unique to you, this section explores some situations, questions and feelings you might recognise.

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 are the only one who hears 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 our pages on [managing your voices](#) and treatment for more information about the support available.

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 different reasons.

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, 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 voices

Your voices might:

- **be unkind** to you, and criticise and undermine you
- **tell you to do things** that are wrong
- **demand** that you hurt yourself.

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.

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.

"I didn't want to talk about it because that would somehow make it more real."

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.

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.

How can I help myself cope?

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.

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."

Voices and your past

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.

Voices and your life now

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.

Keep a diary

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's happening when you hear them, 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. You might also notice if particular things seem to trigger your voices.

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

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. For example, 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 pay attention 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.

"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

A safe space to talk to other people who hear voices can help you to feel heard and understood.

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.

You might find it helpful to contact a peer support group such as the [Amity Mutual Support Society](#) or other service providers such as [Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service](#) or your local Integrated Community Centre for Mental Wellness (ICCMW) that offer peer support services to see if they offer any support for people who hear voices. You can find your nearest ICCMW [here](#).

“As soon as I began talking, I found my voice again and the fear slowly evaporated.”

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. Our pages on [coping with sleep problems](#) and [relaxation](#) have more information.
- Think about your diet. Eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar stable can make a difference to your mood and energy levels. Our pages on [food and mood](#) have more information.
- Learn ways to relax. Learning to relax can help you look after your wellbeing if you are feeling stressed or anxious. Our pages on [relaxation](#) have tips you could try.
- Spend time in nature. Being outside in green space can improve your wellbeing and help you feel more in touch with your surroundings. Our pages on [nature and mental health](#) have more information.
- Try and take some exercise. Exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing. Our pages on [physical activity](#) have more information.

Spiritual help

If you feel that your voices are a spiritual experience, you might want to talk to someone from your faith.

Unfortunately not all of them will understand your experience but some mental health professionals may be able to suggest someone who can help. You may wish to contact local organisations, such as [Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service](#) that offer care.

What treatments are available?

If your voices are a problem, for example if they are causing you distress or affecting your day to day life, you might want to seek medical treatment.

How can I access treatment?

The first place to go is normally 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 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 you're not delirious
- **if it's a side effect** of any medication you're taking.

Different doctors may have different approaches. Our page on [seeking help in Hong Kong](#) has information on what to expect when speaking to different mental health professionals.

You might find getting a diagnosis is a positive experience because:

- **you find that a diagnosis helps** you make sense of your experiences
- **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
- **being diagnosed with a mental health problem may make you feel worried**, as though you can never recover.

Talking therapies

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

See our pages on [talking therapies](#) for more information on how they work and how to access them.

Type of talking treatment	How it might help with voices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychotherapy 	<p>A psychotherapist may be able to help you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) 	<p>Can help you deal with how the voices make you feel and think about yourself without always going into the underlying reasons for them.</p> <p>CBT may help you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduce your anxiety about the voices • help you stand up to them • help you gain control over your voices. <p>See our pages on CBT for more information.</p> <p>You may be offered a type of CBT for psychosis called 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.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) 	<p>MBCT is a type of therapy that combines mindfulness and CBT. It may help you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. <p>See our pages on mindfulness for more information.</p>

You may also be offered other treatments including [arts and creative therapies](#).

For more information on treatments for specific mental health problems, see our pages on treatments for [psychosis](#), [schizophrenia](#), [depression](#) and [bipolar disorder](#).

“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 pages on [antipsychotics](#) for general information about this type of medication, and details about specific drugs.

Before deciding to take any drug, it's important to make sure you have all the facts you need to make an informed choice.

See our pages on things to consider [before taking medication](#) and your [right to refuse medication](#). Our pages on [coming off medication](#) also give guidance on how to come off medication safely.

How can other people help?

This section is for family or 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 same person.** 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 to a doctor, support worker or other people who hear voices.

"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. Our pages [why do I hear voices](#) and [what it's like to live with voices](#) 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 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. You can find out more about looking after yourself in our pages on [coping while supporting someone else](#), [managing stress](#) and [maintaining your wellbeing](#).

Useful Contacts

Who else could help?

Early Psychosis Foundation

www.episo.org/

Society which aims to provide accessible knowledge and experience promote best clinical practice and high-quality early psychosis intervention services, professional training, and public awareness programs.

Internet-based Psychosis Education Program for Caregivers

<http://ipep.hk/>

Provides more information on psychosis and hallucinations.

For more support options

Non-urgent support options, including low-cost services:

www.mind.org.hk/community-directory/

Access to quick mental health information via Help Me virtual assistant:

www.mind.org.hk/help-me/

What to do in a crisis

If you are in a crisis situation where you feel that you need urgent help:

If you feel able to, you can speak to a trusted friend or family member, or a medical or mental health professional. Starting the conversation can be hard, but these people want to talk to you and help you to cope.

If you think you may act on suicidal feelings, or you have seriously harmed yourself: Phone **999** or go to your nearest **A&E department**.

Suicide 24 Hour Hotlines:

The Samaritans Befrienders: **23892222**

The Samaritans (multilingual): **28960000**

Suicide Prevention Services (Cantonese only): **23820000**

For more places to seek urgent support (including additional hotlines):

www.mind.org.hk/find-help-now/

For further information on how to seek help in Hong Kong visit:

www.mind.org.hk/getting-help/

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About Mind HK

Mind HK is a registered S88 charity (91/16471) committed to improving awareness and understanding of mental health in Hong Kong. We collaborate with other local and international mental health charities and provide online support and training programmes, based on global best practice, to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem and equip them with the resources they need. Through collaborative research, Mind HK is leading the way in understanding mental health problems in the city and providing its population with the right support and resources.

For more on Mind HK and its mission and vision, please visit: www.mind.org.hk



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