

Self-help guide to talking with voices

Ideas for people who hear voices and want to try engaging in dialogue with them



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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is meant as inspiration for people who hear voices as well as their friends, family and other people in their network.

We want to acknowledge that talking with voices is not for everyone – some people find it useful and some people don't. Looking at this guide might help you think about whether it's something for you.

There may be things in the guide you find helpful and some things you don't agree with which is absolutely fine. Everyone is different and what works for one person might not work for another.

We also want to acknowledge that using the term 'voices' and 'hearing voices' is not always honouring of what people are experiencing.

People describe their experiences in their own way and for some people it can include other senses than hearing but also entering different states of mind. Some people feel elated, inspired or supported by their experiences and other people feel deeply distressed, angry or exhausted.

There are also many different ways of explaining and naming these experiences, amongst other: djinns, spirit guides, schizophrenia, auditory hallucinations, persecution, electronic harassment, intrusive thoughts, thought transmissions, inner voices, ancestors, energies, beings and invisible presences.

Having these experiences is not uncommon but in our society (Northern Europe), it is usually regarded as problematic. It means that it can be tricky to find safe spaces to talk about what you are going through, explore ways of coping and holding on to hope that this is not something that has to define you or your life forever.

We hope that this guide can help anyone who reads it, to think about how we can support ourselves and others when going through difficult things, whether it is having experiences such as hearing voices or dealing with challenging relationships or situations in life.

This guide is far from exhaustive! There are many more things to be said about talking with voices and many stories to be told about how people have done it, how they have found it and how the voices have found it.

But we wanted to keep it fairly brief while also trying to address some of the most common things we have come across over the years.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Why would I want to speak with voices?

It may sound like a strange or mad thing to do. Society tends to encourage people to think voice hearing is bad and one that it is best to ignore the voices at all costs. However, many people have found that if done in a measured way, talking with their voices can be helpful. Particularly if you have others around you who are supportive of this.

Learning to talk with voices in a measured way can help some people better manage the experience. Some people have found through this approach their voices have become more collaborative and respectful. Some people have found that if they develop a way of talking with their voices where there is give and take, the voices can become more constructive and less controlling.

Even if the voice has not changed in this way some people have found that relating to the voice respectfully but assertively has helped them feel more confident in themselves. Talking with the voices can also sometimes help create more understanding of why the voices are the way they are.

Jeff found by talking with a critical voice and asking it for advice that the voice wanted him to be more assertive with his work colleague. When he tried to be more assertive with his colleague, he found his voice started to be a lot more respectful towards him.

Mandy found by talking with a voice that was critical of how she did her artwork, that the voice wanted her to be more organised. When she started planning her week and when she would do artwork, the voice seemed to be less anxious and critical of her.

If you feel too scared of the voice or voices to talk with them

It can seem daunting to try and talk with voices and if you have a lot of fear it might be good to try some different ways of lessening your fear.

These things may help:

- Going to a hearing voices group
- Keeping a diary of what the voices say and how it impacts on you and how you cope and sharing this with someone you trust.
- Finding friends, family members or supporters who help you build your confidence in talking about the voices and living with them.

Some people say that when they first started hearing voices everything felt very chaotic and overwhelming. If you are experiencing a lot of distress and confusion talking with voices might be too much. You might look into ways of coping with voices and creating more safety for yourself.

Asking for support from others

Trying to change how we relate to a voice we struggle with is a similar challenge to trying to change a relationship to a person we find difficult.

It takes courage, persistence and creativity.

It's hard to do this alone - having others who we can share how it is going and who we can bounce ideas off can be very important.

PREPARATION

It can be useful to consider: What is my intention?

If voices sense you are only talking with them in the hope that they will go away, they may not want to co-operate.

We suggest a useful aim of dialogue can be to establish a more co-operative relationship where you feel you have choices. Therefore, it is important to avoid giving the voice too much authority or power. You can consider its views and suggestions, but you are the boss!

Some things that people have said they were hoping to get out of talking with their voices have been:

- I want to be less afraid of the voices
- I want to find out why they are there
- I want to be able to negotiate with them so I can have more time to myself and to do things I enjoy without them interfering

Awareness of the body

When listening to or talking with a voice it will help if you can try to maintain upright and open body posture. Voices will be more likely to respect you if you develop a more confident way of being and relating.

Dance, yoga and martial arts are all examples of activities that can help us develop our awareness of our body and how to physically hold ourselves that might improve our confidence.

It might be helpful for you to try to become centred and grounded before talking with your voices. You could use a breathing exercise or for a walk as way to prepare for communicating with your voice(s).

Being aware of our bodies can also help us know when something is getting too much. If we start feeling physically uncomfortable, restless, or overly anxious it might be an indication that it's time to finish the conversation with the voice or take a break.

If you are afraid you might get overwhelmed

You can set a time limit for the process or try to find someone who can help you talk with your voices.

Also it's good to have a list of calming activities and coping strategies that you can use if you feel overwhelmed by trying to listen to and talk with voices. What kind of things do you normally do if you need to calm down, feel safer and take your mind off something tricky?

When you start to talk with your voices it is important to start in small ways to avoid it becoming overwhelming. For example, creating a listening space just for 5, 10 or 15 minutes each day where you focus on the voice or voices.

You can schedule in time afterwards to do something you enjoy to help you shift from talking with the voice back into your daily routines.

Look after yourself and take breaks

If it is heavy going trying to talk with the voices, you can have an intermission or come back to a conversation later in the day or week.

Perhaps try doing something physical and grounding before and after talking with a voice like going for a walk in the park or doing some stretches.

We recommend you have people you can talk to about how it is going and ways of making sense of what the voices say and do.

IDEAS FOR TALKING WITH VOICES

How can I talk to the voices I hear?

Preparation is important. It can be as simple as setting the scene, finding a quiet location where you feel safe. There may be people or objects that can help create this sense of safety (e.g. a weighted blanket, a trusted friend, cups of tea and cake).

Voices often respond to a welcoming attitude. If the voices sense you are trying to talk with them to get rid of them, they will be unlikely to co-operate. Therefore, trying to approach the conversation with an open mind can be useful. You can explain that you are trying to find common ground and a way to live more harmoniously with the voice or explore whether voices may be helpful.

You can schedule in regular times to talk with or listen to the voice.

When you start the conversation or listening time you can politely check out if it is a good time for the voice e.g. "are you free to talk now?"

Some different ways to talk with voices you can try:

- Talking out loud – if in public maybe use a mobile phone or wear a headset. Then you can talk to your voices without drawing attention to yourself. Talking out loud can feel scary but some people who hear voices find that it helps them be firm and assert themselves.
- Talking with the voices inside your head or mind.
- Writing out a conversation – you can write questions to the voices and write down their answers. Or you can just write down what they say – a bit like a secretary. Voices tend to like to have your full attention and writing down what they say can be a way to be present with them.

Whichever way you try, it may be worth considering making it time limited.

Tell the voices in advance that you will be talking with them or listening to them for 10, 20 or 30 minutes.

If you are worried about losing track of the time you can set an alarm to help you.

You don't want to spend all your time talking with the voices. Some people describe getting drawn into the voices world and forget to spend time with other people and doing things they like. It's important to get a balance; limiting the time

you spend with the voices (as described above) can be a way of finding that balance.

How do I start a conversation with the voices?

You can try being a role model for how to do respectful conversation by greeting the voice saying: "hello" and asking: "how are you?".

Think about how you would start a conversation with someone you've just met. Even if you have heard the voice for a long time, you may feel that you don't really know it very well.

When we meet new people, what do we do to show that we are curious about them? You can ask a voice about what its interest are, for example what it likes in terms of music or food or entertainment.

Using a name for the voice can be helpful

You can ask the voice if they have a name or would like to choose one. If the voice struggles with this, you may be able to make suggestions. If you don't feel comfortable giving your voices names you can use numbers to distinguish between them.

We recommend choosing something the voice is okay with.

How can I keep the conversation respectful?

You can request that the voice treats you with respect and make an agreement that, if the voice is unable to do this, you will need to stop the conversation.

Remember to stick with the agreement yourself too. Be respectful but also remember to stop the conversation if the voice is being disrespectful.

The voice may be testing your resolve and try and push your buttons. Try not to get drawn into a shouting match. If you do, remember to be kind to yourself. You are trying to do things differently and that can be hard at first.

What can I talk about?

One aim of dialoguing can be to find out what the voices underlying intention is.

It can be helpful to try and find out what the voice is feeling and needing or what is important to the voice.

You can also ask a voice how it relates to newspaper headlines. You can also ask a voice for tips or reflections on issues you are facing.

You can maybe see yourself as an investigating journalist. You are trying to gather more information so that maybe you can better understand why the voice is there, what it thinks its job or mission is and how you can live better together.

What questions can I ask the voices?

Here are some ideas and suggestions:

How are you?

What's important to you right now?

How are you feeling?

Do you have any advice for me?

What would my life be like if you weren't there?

What is your job?

What music/food do you like?

What situations do you dislike?

How do you relax and get rest?

How are you finding talking to me?

If you are beginning to have more of a dialogue with a voice you can try and ask questions like:

When you say (...repeat something the voice often says...) what do you mean?

Why do you say this? Why do you say this now?

How do you feel when I (describe an activity e.g. go to the shops)?

An alternative question to ask a voice instead of 'why are you saying that?' could be 'what is your intention?'

Some people describe it as useful to ask a voice 'what is your highest intention?' or 'what are you trying to achieve' in a calm and steady voice.

How can I build a better relationship with the voices?

Can you find common ground with your voice?

It could be that for half an hour a week you listen to music a voice likes or eat food it likes once a week. Or you can negotiate what clothes to wear – e.g. let the voices choose which socks/scarf to wear or ask them if there is a particular piece of jewellery/accessory they like.

It might be worth trying to keep your voice(s) informed of your plans for the day. Especially voices that feel anxious can calm down when you tell them what is going to happen. It makes things more predictable and might help the voice feel safer.

Building relationships based on equality and respect can be hard work. Equality means that both parties take responsibility for what they say and do, you try to express yourself clearly and with honesty (which can be scary) and you respect difference of opinions. You don't try to impose your way of doing things or your way of seeing the world on others.

What are things to avoid in dialoguing / talking with the voices?

- Talking with them all the time. Try to balance it with engaging with the outside world (E.g. dialoguing with a voice for half an hour a day and make sure you have plans to do other things as well).
- Being aggressive towards voices. Some voices like banter and assertiveness but we think it's important not to become a bully towards voices.
- Trying to force a voice to talk.
- Not sticking to agreements – like any relationship sticking to agreements will help build trust and respect.
- Being dishonest.

Using humour

Humour can be a helpful way to lighten a conversation or build bridges. Some voices like irony and witty comments. There may be things you can laugh about with voices you normally disagree with.

Once you get to know the voices you hear they may turn out to have a great sense of humour or you might find that together you can see the funny side of things.

Using creativity

Changing how we relate to each other doesn't have to always be about talking. Sometimes it can be nice to do things a bit differently.

Here are some things that other people who hear voices have done:

- Creating a Facebook profile for their voices. The voices had to choose their name and profile picture and it created a dialogue about what the voices liked and didn't like. If you don't want to create a real Facebook profile you can ask the voice what kind of things it would like to put on a profile if you were making an online account for it.
- Making puppets to represent the voices. Together with the voice decide on looks etc. There are youtube videos that show how you can make finger puppets or puppets using wooden spoons.
- Making collages. Together with the voice choose images and words to create a collage that tells a story about the voice or says something about how/who the voice is.
- Writing poetry/rap.
- Writing for the voice. Like a secretary taking down notes when someone is talking.
- Drawing or painting the voices, how they feel or stories they tell.
- Invite the voice along when you do things e.g. go for a walk, do pottery together etc.
- Dedicate an activity to the voice – e.g. eating something comforting, doing yoga or exercise, listening to music. Let the voice know you are doing this thing because you know he/she likes it.

Talking with critical voices

Talking to and negotiating with critical voices can be hard work and we might need a lot of support to do this. This might include going to support groups, seeking help from a counsellor or therapist and learning assertiveness and nonviolent communication skills. We find it helpful to see all voices as originally having a positive or protective function even though they may be saying distressing things.

Critical voices maybe trying to protect us from feelings of shame or guilt or from being rejected (even though paradoxically they may make us feel shame or guilt). For example, a voice that calls us ugly may be trying to protect us from social rejection by getting us to not go out. The downside is of course the critical voice can leave us feeling hurt and undermine our confidence. Sometimes it can be helpful

to tell the voice that you can see how it may be trying to protect you. You can give the voice evidence or explain to it, how it is now safer to engage with other people than it might have been in the past. Writing positive self-affirming and compassionate phrases down on paper and sticking them on the wall in your home can be helpful to help you be kind to yourself. For example: "I am doing my best", "I am determined to learn to love myself" and "I respect myself".

Voices and Compassion

It might be helpful to develop a part of you that is compassionate and confident to counterbalance a critical voice. This is not about getting into an argument with a critical voice but rather developing a part of us that can be kind and supportive to ourselves about the things the critical voice is focussing on.

We may need help to do this from supportive people around us. Some people find that they can better dialogue with their voices if they first build this compassionate part and come from that compassionate self or part when they do this.

The 5 minute film compassion for voices (see www.compassionforvoices.com) shows how Stuart works with a therapist to do this. Firstly, he learns grounding breathing techniques and then he visualises what it would be like to be confident and kind and wise. This includes trying out how he would hold himself and walk if he felt these qualities in himself. When he has built up a strong enough sense of his compassionate part, he begins to assertively but kindly dialogue with his voices.

Voices and symbolic language

Sometimes voices don't mean what they say literally.

It may be that they are using metaphorical or symbolic language, like we can experience when we dream or in some art.

'You need bigger shoes' could mean that people are walking all over you.

'You need to die' may mean you need to make a change and develop new ways of being in the world. Or it may mean you need to find ways to feel a greater level of safety and power in your life.

It may be helpful to write down what the voice is saying and to look at it later to try and find some meaning in what it is saying. If you find a voice is difficult to understand you can also ask the voice to say more about what it means and this may give you more to go on.

WHAT IFS

What if the voice does not want to talk to me?

There may be times when voices don't want to talk. It can create difficulties if you try and force a voice to talk with you when it doesn't want to. The hope is that you can create a better relationship which means being respectful. If you try and force a conversation it can easily turn into an argument.

If a voice doesn't want to talk you can ask it: "when would be a more convenient time to talk?"

Even if the voices do not respond to what you say, you can say 'yes' or 'no' to yourself in response to things they say. You make your own opinion and standpoint clear. This is a way to let the voices know you are listening and that you have your own way of seeing things.

Voices might behave dismissively at first or try to deter you from talking with them by being avoidant, aggressive or patronising. Some voices refuse to respond at first and pretend like they can't hear you.

Don't give up if this happens.

Voices might like to know if you are going to stick with them, like they are testing you to see how determined you are. If you stick to doing things respectfully and keep letting them know you are interested in them, things can change over time.

Voices might have learned not to trust anyone who is nice to them or they might think your new way of treating them is just a strategy to get rid of them or manipulate them.

They might not like new things or that things are changing so at first, they can try and keep things the way they are by ignoring or intimidating you. If they have had a lot of power in your life, they might not like the idea of losing control over you and they might not understand the benefits of a more equal relationship between you.

What if I find the voices too controlling?

It is not uncommon that the voices are demanding you carry out actions.

They may make threats or try to bully you into doing things, promising they will be nice to you or go away if you do what they say.

The first thing you might want to learn to do is to assertively set boundaries.

You can practice standing up to your voices with a friend or supporter.

If a voice says: "cut yourself", you can practice saying something like "no I want to find another way to cope with my distress"

If a voice says: "kill yourself", you can practice saying back "I want to live" or "I choose life".

If a voice says: "don't go out", practice saying "I want to go out because I need/want... (fresh air/to see my friends/exercise/do the shopping etc.)"

Practice saying back things clearly and confidently.

Look at the kind of things the voices you hear usually say and think of things you can say back.

Practising with yourself or a friend is good because you may feel overwhelmed when the voices come along and then it is easy to forget what you had planned to do. When you have practised it, it can be easier to do. Like practising sport or playing an instrument – when we rehearse things, they come more easily to us when we are under pressure.

What if the voices are too offensive?

If your voices are being insulting, you can try saying: 'when you say (example of the words the voice uses) I feel hurt or sad because I need respect to feel safe. So please can you talk to me in a more kind / respectful way'.

If a voice continues to be disrespectful and you feel upset you can terminate the conversation and let the voice know that you need to be talked to respectfully to engage in a conversation.

What if I hear many voices?

It can be useful to map out the different voices you hear according to their different characteristics, see video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MN7mFIQyQNs>

You can also try dividing voices into different groups if that is helpful.

It can also be productive to explain to a voice or a group of voices that you can only hear one at a time.

You can introduce the idea of a talking stick and only the voice 'holding' the talking stick can speak.

Or ask the voices to organise it so they have a rota for who gets to talk to you.

Some people have found it useful to start with the strongest voices, others have found it helpful to start with the voice most willing to dialogue.

What if I hear voices that are crying?

You can dedicate a soothing activity (such as a face massage or a breathing exercise) to the voice or soothing music or read the voice a children's story.

Some voices appreciate it if you help them create a safe place they can go to for refuge. This can be done by drawing a safe place or using your imagination collaboratively with the voice.

What if a voice tells me to kill myself?

This can be a very distressing to hear. You might want to get support from others in dealing with this.

There are all sorts of reasons why voices might say this.

Voices may be feeling hopeless and distressed themselves. They maybe reliving difficult memories.

Another reason could be they might be trying to get your attention. They may be angry with you and want to feel powerful and intimidating.

If you feel confident enough to you can ask the voice about its reasons for saying this.

A voice that talks about killing yourself may reflect that part of you is feeling suicidal. It may be helpful for you to focus on what your motivations are for living before you engage in a dialogue or let your voice know that you have decided to live.

To do this you can practise (by yourself or with someone you trust) saying "I want to live" or "I choose life". You can try and make a list for yourself for reason you choose to live, like 'I like listening to music', 'my family/friends are important to me', 'I enjoy food', 'I want to experience getting old', 'I have goals I want to try and achieve' or something else personal to you. They can be big or small and they may change over time.

What if a voice tells me not to go out?

This is very common. It may be that going out feels frightening to the voice, because the outside world is scary to it and unpredictable.

It may be useful to try and ask the voice what would make it feel safer when you go out. For example, many voices relax more when they are informed about the person's plans for the day. You can also explain to the voice why you want to go out. E.g. "I want to go out because I need/want..."

What if the voice uses a lot of swear words?

Voices might be aggressive when they are angry or confused. Or it might be because they know it will make you pay attention to them.

You can try and ask a voice that swears, whether he/she feels angry or upset about something.

You can also tell the voice that you will pay attention properly to what he/she has to say for 5 or 10 minutes but only if he/she stops swearing.

Alternatively, if you are comfortable with it you can join the voice in doing a bit of swearing.

A lot of people find if they start being aggressive back at the voice the argument escalates. However, some voices respect the person if they firmly set a boundary even if this involves a swear word.

Some voices enjoy banter. The important thing is to try to stay relaxed and choose a way of relating you are comfortable with.

What if the voice does not seem to make any sense?

You could try writing down what the voice is saying and look at it later with somebody to see if you can find some meaning in what it is saying.

You can ask the voice to clarify or you can ask it questions for it to answer with a 'yes' or 'no'.

You can try and ask the voice why it is talking the way it is; maybe it likes to be mysterious, maybe it has its own language or is speaking a language you don't know or maybe the voice is feeling very confused and overwhelmed.

Sometimes building a relationship means you have to try and find a common language that you can speak to each other. It's the same with people – like some professions have their own jargon or some areas have their own dialect. Some people like to talk using abstract and philosophical words and other people have a very down to earth way of talking. Sometimes we have to ask each other what we mean when we say certain things or use certain words.

Maybe you and the voice you hear need to negotiate a way of talking that you are both okay with.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We've created this guide because we've found that there is very little available about how to talk to voices when you are the person hearing them.

We deliver training about talking with voices and the majority of people who show an interest are working in a professional capacity with people who hear voices.

We want to make the ideas around talking with voices available to everyone. We don't think we necessarily need special training to engage with the voices people hear.

If you read this guide and find that there is something important we have missed out, please let us know and we can try and add it in future versions.

This is the second version of this guide – we created an initial guide in 2017 and asked for feedback online and from people we know has a lot of experience in this area.

We want to thank everyone who has helped us – the list is long but we hope you know who you are!

Rufus and Elisabeth

Rufus has worked with hearing voices groups since 2001 and talking with voices approaches since 2005.

Elisabeth hears voices and over the years she has tried different approaches to living with the voices she hears. She has been working as an organiser and facilitator of hearing voices events and training since 2006.

RESOURCES

Useful books on communication skills

Nonviolent communication: a language of life

by Marshall Rosenberg

Say what you mean a mindful approach to nonviolent communication

by Oren Sofer

Websites on communication skills

Verbal Aikido website

www.verbal-aikido.com

Non-violent communication

<https://nvc-resolutions.co.uk/about-nonviolent-communication/>

<https://nvc-uk.com/nvc-in-a-nutshell/>

<https://nvc-resolutions.co.uk/nvc-online-resources/>

Online resources about hearing voices

A website to support and promote compassionate approaches to voices and other experiences

www.compassionforvoices.com

Rufus and Elisabeth's website sharing different resources

www.openmindedonline.com

List of books about hearing voices

<https://openmindedonline.com/resources/books/books-hearing-voices/>

Understanding Voices is a new online resource that aims to provide clear, comprehensive and balanced information about hearing voices.

www.understandingvoices.com

Online book and audio presentation of people's experiences of hearing voices

<http://www.listeningtovoices.org.uk/>

International website for the hearing voices movement <http://www.intervoiceonline.org/about-voices>

For young people and their families

<http://www.voicecollective.co.uk/about-voices/>

Ideas about recovery

<http://www.intervoiceonline.org/support-recovery>

Project researching hearing voices

<https://hearingthevoice.org/frequently-asked-questions/>

Support forums and links to peer support groups:

In the UK <https://www.hearing-voices.org/hearing-voices-groups/>

In the US <http://www.hearingvoicesusa.org/forum/index>

For young people <http://forum.voicecollective.co.uk/>

International discussion forum <http://www.intervoiceonline.org/support-recovery/online-discussion-forum>