

Young people that hear voices

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When we learn about a young person hearing voices, we can often jump to conclusions that they may be experiencing a psychotic episode or schizophrenia. However, the majority of young people that experience voice hearing do not have a severe or complex mental health need, but are instead hearing voices in response to adversity or life circumstances. This document contributes to de-pathologising voice hearing in young people.

Hearing voices in childhood is as common as having asthma or dyslexia, with up to 75% of young people having at least one voice-hearing experience [1].

Circumstances in which a young person might hear voices:

- Coping with emotional stress and trauma – abuse, neglect, bereavement, parental mental health and more are classified as childhood adversity and can impact an individual's emotional, mental and physical health. People that have lost a loved one and hear the voice of them can find this experience comforting.
- Prescribed medication and illicit drugs – some steroid, pain medication or illegal drugs can cause someone to hear voices.
- Spiritual experiences – across many world religions and indigenous practices like Shamanism, highly spiritual individuals and leaders have expressed hearing the voice of God and other Beings. There are many studies exploring the link between voice hearing and spiritual awakenings or satanic possession. In some cultures, voice hearing is considered a gift that helps people converse with ghosts or spirits.
- Physical illness – voice hearing can be the result of physical ailments like high temperatures, lack of sleep, head injuries and epilepsy.

“THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS THAT WE EXPERIENCE AS INDIVIDUALS THAT WE DO NOT SHARE. THEY ARE UNIQUE TO OURSELVES; THAT DOES NOT MEAN THEY DON'T HAPPEN.”

- DEBRA LAMPSHIRE [2]

The voices in my head | Eleanor Longden – TED Talk | [3]

Eleanor Longden began to hear voices as a young adult and was subsequently diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalised for treatment. She is now the Postdoctoral Service User Research Manager at The Psychosis Research Unit and is an advocate for voice hearers. Some reflections Eleanor made about hearing voices for 10 years:

- The voices mirrors her unexpressed, inaccessible emotions and unprocessed [traumatic] memories that were often related to shame and low self-worth.
- The wider world viewed Eleanor’s voice hearing as negative and deemed her as ‘insane.’
- Eleanor came to recognise that the voices were metaphorical in nature. For example, she understood that the voices were often protective of her; she learnt to become respectful towards the voices and to implement boundaries with them.
- Eleanor viewed her voices as a meaningful response to traumatic memories, as a “source of insight into solvable emotional problems.”

Ethnically diverse populations, indigenous populations and religious practices

In the UK, ethnically diverse groups are more likely to be diagnosed with psychosis and be prescribed antipsychotics, though are less likely to access mental health services.

Amongst all communities, Black individuals have the highest rate of receiving a psychosis diagnosis and are 4 times more likely to be detained under the mental health act. Institutional racism and a misunderstanding of the cultural and spiritual needs of Black people can be considered a contributing factor to this. [4/5]

Western medicine has come to stigmatise mental illness and voice hearing. However, from a Shamanic perspective, a practice that has been around since ancient times, voice hearing is considered to be a deeply spiritual experience and a gift. Voice hearing often relates to the expression of spirits, elementals, ancestors, demons and so forth. It is within Shamanic practices that the Shaman forms a connection with these voices as a way of unpicking and understanding the messages that are being shared [6]. Paul Borges’ research on Shamanism delves further into this.

Amongst many religions and ancient traditions, voice hearing has been considered as a person hearing the voice of God or entering a higher state of consciousness, a gift to communicate with the spiritual realm or even possession of demons and negative spirits. It should be encouraged that voice hearing is not only explored from a Western, medical perspective, but from the voice hearers cultural perspective.

Links for further information and references:

1. <https://theconversation.com/parents-dont-panic-if-your-child-hears-voices-its-actually-quite-common-78964>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjL2dqONlqQ&t=884s>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syjEN3peCJw>
4. <https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying-and-mental-health/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-mental-health/>
5. https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/704a1aa29107608c83347eba44676c1706acad3d6332c1a1c62156bb6ee125cf/6160782/Zafirah_Sathar_MRP_2022_2.pdf
6. <https://www.hearingvoices.org.nz/attachments/article/14/Shamans%20as%20Expert%20Voice%20Hearers%20By%20Ingo%20Lambrecht.pdf>
7. https://www.hearing-voices.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Parents-Booklet-1-Intro_web.pdf