Bradford and Airedale Early Intervention Service

Culture Fusion

Bradford

BD1 2EP

Tel:01274 221021

**COPING WITH DISTURBING VOICES**

This leaflet has been produced by Early Intervention with the help of service users and voice hearers

**You and Your Care**

Published: September 2014 Review Date: September 2015 Pin: 00463v1

**HOW I FELT**

**AFTER USING COPING STRATEGY**

**COPING STRATEGY DIARY**

**SITUATION**

**WHAT DID THE VOICE(S) SAY?**

**HOW I FELT**

**WAS IT HELPFUL OR UNHELPFUL?**

**COPING**

**STRATEGY**

 **I USED**

**1**

**14**

**DATE &**

**TIME**

**WHAT I COULD DO DIFFERENTLY NEXT TIME**

**WHAT DID**

**HOW I FELT**

**VOICE DIARY**

**WHAT IT SAIID**

**IDENTITY OF**

**VOICE(S)**

**PLACE**

**INTRODUCTION**

**This booklet has been produced to try and help you cope with voice hearing.**

**You can use it with your worker from Early Intervention or other supportive networks, or on your own, to try different techniques and see what works for you.**

**It is important to remember that some people find challenging their voices can initially make them worse. They may become more aggressive and intrusive, or threaten punishment for daring to oppose them. Persistence with the strategies mentioned in this booklet often pays off but it is important to make sure that you have the right sort of support in doing this.**

**2**

**13**

**IMPROVING SELF-ESTEEM**

Very often, disturbing voices disappear spontaneously when a person’s self-esteem improves. This is particularly likely when the criticism of the voices reflects how a person is feeling about themselves. Coping strategies to stop or control the voices can improve self-esteem, simply by removing feelings of powerlessness, but there are also many simple methods that can be used to help people feel more positive about themselves. Voluntary work, evening classes, computer sessions or workshops are a good way to socialise, learn new skills and generally build confidence. Pamper yourself with a relaxing bath with aromatherapy oils, light some candles and listen to some soothing music, or prepare a favourite meal and watch a film. Some people find it helpful to make a list of their feelings and then write positive statements about themselves, or the world around them.

Creativity is always a powerful tool in gaining strength over despair. This doesn’t have to be about making something: anything which lifts us out of our pain and makes us feel good is creative.

**3**

The next pages have examples of a voice diary and a coping strategy diary.

**VOICE DIARY**

Some people find that keeping a voice diary and reflecting back on it can help them to identify ‘triggers’ that can make their voices worse. For example:

* Do they occur at any particular time or situation?
* Are there times they are louder or more aggressive?
* Is the voice(s) frequency affected by how you are feeling?
* Is what the voice(s) say related to the way you feel about yourself at the time you hear them?
* Are there any other factors which seem to affect the voice(s)? e.g. Does the voice(s) remind you of anyone else and what they might have or do say to you?

**COPING STRATEGY DIARY**

The coping strategy diary is similar to the voice diary but this time focussing on what you do at the times when the voices are worse.

By monitoring the coping strategies you are using, it may help you to see what works and what doesn’t work for you.

**12**

**‘I wrote down a list of positive statements about myself and learned to repeat them, things like ‘I don’t deserve to be told such horrible things about myself. I’m a good person, there are lots of people who like me and love me.’ When I’d say these things, the voices would fade away.’**

 EI Service User

**RELAXATION**

As well as reducing the distress caused by voices, some people find that relaxation can cause them to stop altogether. There are a wide variety of techniques that are effective for relaxation: and some people develop a personal method through a process of trial and error which will only work for them. People have found that it is often easier to learn and practice these techniques, when they are not hearing any voices. Once they have become confident in their ability to induce relaxation, they have a ‘tool’ they can use if the voices begin. As well as formal techniques, like Yoga, Tai-Chi or meditation, some members use temporary ‘time out’ where they avoid the stress or emotional pressures that can make their voices worse by spending some time alone. People have also found it useful to unwind with a hot drink, a warm bath, or a massage.

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

Some people find that changing their levels of physical activity can help to reduce voices, and sometimes even get rid of them. Common sense can be remarkably beneficial! When feeling over-stimulated (stressed, emotional, tense or anxious) reducing physical activity through relaxation, sleep, soothing music or other calming activities, can reduce the tension associated with voices. On the other hand, when voices are linked with low levels of physical activity, vigorous exercise like jogging, sport, aerobics, or just a brisk walk, can be very helpful.

**4**

**SELF-MONITORING**

Self-monitoring involves keeping a detailed record of voice experiences. This can be keeping a voice diary or a coping strategy diary. These methods can be useful for identifying any ‘triggers’, as well as gaining insight into possible nature and meaning of the voices. Keeping a diary makes it easier to see if any patterns are emerging with the voices. Looking back over a record of this kind can be surprising: you may hear voices less often than you thought, or deal with them more positively than you were aware of. And even when a voice experience has been particularly distressing, having a written account of how you dealt with it can give you extra strength when you most need it.

Organising how you are going to cope in the future can help you gain the confidence and courage to move on. When the voices see your determination, they may become less threatening. Because it is written rather than spoken, a diary is a good way of expressing negative feelings and emotions that are too difficult to talk about to other people. Some of these feelings may be connected to the voices, some may not, but getting these emotions out can help make them clearer and easier to understand how they are reflected in behaviour. Words in a diary can be as violent or angry as you need them to be: no one is hurt by it, and it can be a relief to vent frustration in this way. You are free to share as much or of little of it as you like with friends or a sympathetic professional but ultimately it is something for you: a way of communicating and expressing anything that you want or need to.

**11**

**‘I’ve found that I can ‘breathe’ the voice away by gently inhaling and exhaling. It doesn’t always last, but I find I can relax and the voice goes away, and so does the stress, and I feel more peaceful.’**

 EI Service User

**‘Emotions like anger or pain – even happiness – can be incredibly powerful and difficult to deal with. It can be helpful for me to write things down so I’ve got a record of how I cope with and channel these feelings.’**

 EI Service User

► If the voices claim to have special powers or abilities, what proof is there that they actually do? If asked, are they able to prove that they have these powers?

► If the voices make predictions, do the predictions always come true? If not, does this say anything about their supposed power to accurately predict the future?

► Are the voices statements or commands consistent with their supposed identity? For example, does a voice claiming to be God encourage positive loving behaviour, or does it have a negative and destructive influence?

► If the voices threaten consequences for disobeying them, are these threats actually carried out? Many people who hear commanding voices are able to ignore the orders with no obvious negative consequences.

► How are voices which claim to be supernatural actually heard? Do they speak with human voices? If so, does this suggest anything about their true identity?

► Although it can be difficult to begin with, many people find they have the ability to turn their voices on and off. By using particular coping strategies, or avoiding certain stressors, people can learn to stop the voices occurring as frequently or even stop them appearing at all. Does this ability to control the presence of the voices, say anything about their true nature or identity?

**10**

**DISTRACTION**

Some people describe ignoring the voices as being like ‘tuning out static on the radio’. It can be easier to ignore voices if the mind is occupied instead, with pleasant or positive thoughts, or if attention is focused on a meaningful activity. One person found it beneficial to ‘practice’ ignoring voices by speaking to friends while the radio was on and concentrating on the conversation - not the distracting sound of the radio. Using these skills on ‘artificial’ distractions proved useful for dismissing the voices.

Occasionally voices might give a warning that they are going to appear: people describe experiences like whistling, banging or increased heart-beat that lets them know the voices will soon start speaking. Initially this seems like a negative thing because it heightens anxiety: but it can potentially be positive. Forewarned is forearmed! It’s a good opportunity to prepare ourselves, maybe using a relaxation technique, so when the voices do appear we feel calmer, more in control, and better prepared to cope. We can then decide in advance if we want to listen: if not, then when the ‘warning’ comes, distract yourself.

Many people find that deliberately switching their attention away from the voices and concentrating on something else can help reduce distress. Possible activities might be listening to music, reading, hobbies or crafts, computer games, playing sport, reading a magazine, watching television and prayer. Even just changing their environment helps some people to re-direct their attention, such as leaving the house and going for a walk or visiting a friend. These kinds of activities are not only fun and relaxing, but improve concentration, reduce boredom and isolation and even boost morale and confidence. It’s important to engage in any pastime that you normally enjoy, and not allow the voices to dictate what you should or shouldn’t to.

**5**

**‘Anything’s good, as long as it needs a lot of concentration. But it’s easier if it’s interesting and rewarding, or it’s just something I really enjoy doing.’**

 EI Service User

**IGNORING THE VOICES**

There are many ways of going about this. Various strategies work in different ways for different people, but people who prefer not to make direct contact with the voices will essentially remind themselves that although the voices are distressing, they can’t physically hurt them or force them to do anything they don’t want to do.

**GOOD VOICES**

You might like to try ‘selective listening’ - only ignoring the distressing voices. Voices that are friendly or a good companion are often a valuable source of support, and many people find that ignoring all the voices is no more helpful than paying close attention to all of them, negative ones included. Some voice hearers even find it helpful to ask the ‘good’ voices to help them deal with the ‘bad’ voices. If you feel none of your voices are ‘good’, maybe try and concentrate on the one that is the least distressing, as compared to the more obviously threatening ones.

**6**

**MEDICATION**

Anyone with a psychiatric diagnosis is likely to receive medication to cope with the voices. Many people find that medication can be useful, but is usually only the case if they feel they have control over the amount of medication they are prescribed and how long they are expected to take it. Adverse side-effects (especially depression, weight-gain, sedation and tremors) mean that prolonged use of medication is traumatic for some people. People generally find medication most helpful during an intense and distressing voice experience, or when they need something to help them feel calmer (although you might prefer to combine this with more active coping strategies.) It’s generally agreed that negotiating dosage with a psychiatrist is always worth a try. Voice hearers are experts by experience, and all have unique knowledge and insight into their own lives that deserves to be respected and listened to.

## ASKING THE VOICES QUESTIONS

Negative, distressing voices often seem very powerful, making it difficult not to obey any commands they may make. But to a large extent, the power of the voices can be determined by the identity the hearer gives to them: for example, a voice that claims to be God, the Devil, or some kind of supernatural being, often seems more difficult to oppose than a voice which originates from the person themselves. Many voice hearers have found it helpful to undermine the apparent power and authority of the voices by challenging their beliefs about them. Just as you might plan in advance what you intend to say at a meeting or job interview, it may be helpful to decide what you would like to say to the voices, and practice saying it while the voices are silent. This can help build up the confidence to talk to the voices, which in turn may reduce the power and control the voices seem to have. Some of the following questions may help to check out the voice’s claims and identity:

**9**

#### TIME-SHARING

Some people like to ‘reason’ with their voices in order to set limits on them. If voices can be negotiated with, then it may be possible to ignore them until a time comes when it is less inconvenient to listen. It’s a bit like making an appointment: be firm, and tell the voices that you will speak to them on your terms, not theirs. This can be quite hard to do, and doesn’t work for everyone, but it’s certainly worth a try.

**AUDITORY STIMULATION**

Some people use simple and practical ways of reducing/increasing auditory stimulation (things you may hear) as a means of controlling voices. Experimenting with wearing earplugs, listening to a personal stereo or carrying a mobile phone have all been successful in reducing the intensity of voices. Mobile phones can also be useful if you are in a public place and the voices are so disruptive that you need to respond to them. Talking to yourself will cause a few raised eyebrows: but no one will think twice about someone shouting into a mobile phone!

**7**

**‘By refusing to listen I’m showing that I’m in control of the situation, not them.’**

 EI Service User

**DISMISSAL**

Others find it useful to dismiss the voices by telling them to leave in a loud clear voice (sometimes stamping a foot or pounding a fist on a table for emphasis). This strategy may help to gain a greater sense of control, although it is probably best to do this in private to avoid misunderstanding or embarrassment.

**THOUGHT-STOPPING**

Some people use ‘thought-stopping’ as a means of ignoring voices. This basically involves saying ‘stop!’ when the voice begins, then switching your thoughts to something pleasant to occupy your mind, or paying close attention to your surrounding environment. Some people combine this with ‘aversion techniques’, such as snapping a rubber band against their wrist each time they order the voices to stop, the aim being that if an unwanted voice is immediately followed by a painful (but harmless) experience, then it occurs less often.

**8**

**‘I’ve tried to make a deal with this male voice: I tell him “We’re not going to talk now. I’ll meet you at such-and-such time, and until then I won’t talk to you, you won’t talk to me and we won’t annoy each other.” And most of the time he agrees.’**

 EI Service User