

A man in profile, looking out a window at a cityscape at night. The image is in a teal color scheme. The man is in the foreground, looking out towards the right. The background shows a cityscape with lights and buildings.

**change**  
MENTAL HEALTH

a guide to

# Voices

and sensory  
disturbances

from change mental health

**Information on how to support  
yourself and others when  
managing voices**

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

# You might be distracted. Isolated and depressed. Or suspicious, accusatory and anxious. But what can you do?

Hearing voices that are not actually present can feel very real. These are often accompanied by other sensory disturbances, such as smell, touch, sight and taste, further reinforcing what a person hears. It might not be voices; it could be certain sounds, such as alarm, siren or crying.

In the early stages, it can be difficult for a person to understand.

A person might try to make sense of the voices and feel they have no alternative but to pay attention to them while excluding everything else. This is a new experience that can be exhausting and frightening. **Don't be afraid of your voices, they can't harm you.**

It's important to know that hearing voices doesn't always mean someone has a mental illness. It isn't only limited to people with schizophrenia and psychosis either. It can happen to people with depression, severe anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Hearing voices is common: around 12% of children and up to 15% of adults experience it.

## Voices can:

- Give you false beliefs
- Mix up what you think you believe
- Become overwhelming and disruptive
- Confuse you
- Change their tone to bewilder you.

## They may:

- Keep you isolated
- Make relationships difficult with others
- Stop you from doing new things
- Encourage you to self-harm
- Tell you to move away from familiar surroundings.

## They're not always negative. They can:

- Provide support
- Be a form of companionship
- Be a source of helpful advice
- Be a source of creativity.



# When you hear voices, it might be confusing and scary. You might not know what to do.

**It is important to find a way to manage your voices. Write down your thoughts, clear your mind and give yourself a fresh perspective on what your voices are actually saying.**

## **Makes sense of your voices by building a profile:**

- What do they say?
- What do the voices want from you?
- How do they relate to your experiences?
- What are the triggers?
- Talk about it: you'll have more control over them and it lets others close to you know what helps you to manage the voices.

## **Organise your thoughts by considering some distractions of:**

- Reading
- Writing a safety plan
- Going for a walk
- Listening to music
- Engaging in your existing hobbies.



## Supporting someone who is hearing voices

**Be honest. Say you cannot hear anything but acknowledge that the experience is real for the person.**

Consider that any dialogue you have with the person will be perceived as including the voices too. Although behaviour may appear irrational, there will be underlying logic to the person.

**Be patient. It takes courage and time for people to disclose voices. Their relationship with voices will be exclusive and might be afraid.**

Try and persuade the person to seek support and ask what might help so together you can begin to challenge the voices.

## sensory disturbances

### Smell

Every day objects may not smell as they usually do. One of the more common hallucinations is the smell of burning. Some smells can be more pronounced or seem quite terrible.

### Touch

Solid objects may take on a different form or the sense of touch may be more personal. It has been described that solid objects might become flexible or experience the sensation of touching them.

### Taste

Some food may taste different or medication may seem to have been tampered with. For some people, this may be supported by smell.

### Sight

Words or images can appear fuzzy or colours stronger. Sometimes everything can appear dirty and that items are covered by a film of dust and grease.

### Sound

You may hear things out of the blue, even when it really isn't happening. Whether it's an everyday sound or someone talking to you, these voices can be helpful or distressing.

## contact & info

**This content of this leaflet was developed by people supported by Change Mental Health's Hearing Voices service in Tayside and Fife.**

We support people affected by mental illness in communities across Scotland in person-centred and non-clinical settings.

If you have any questions about the content of this leaflet, or need support with your mental health, please contact our Advice and Support Service:

**e:** [advice@changemh.org](mailto:advice@changemh.org)

**t:** 0808 8010 515

**w:** [www.changemh.org/advice-and-support](http://www.changemh.org/advice-and-support)