



*Facilitating 'Hearing Voices'
Groups*

*Voices Vic – Prahran
Mission Uniting Care*

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Facilitating 'Hearing Voices' Groups

Values and historical basis

'Hearing voices' groups emerged as Professor Marius Romme and Dr Sandra Escher found that many people hear voices without distress or feeling the need to seek mental health services. They interviewed many 'voice hearers' – those coping and those being in distress and those with a diagnosis.

They found that coping 'voice hearers' have different skills, beliefs and supports compared to those who live with often extreme distress. People coping well with voices had:

- Higher self-esteem
- An explanatory framework for the voices
- Ease when discussing the voices with others
- Ability to more often communicate with the voices
- More social and supportive connections
- Ability to set limits with the voices
- Ability to selectively listen to the voices
- Know-how in addressing past traumas and emotional difficulties.

According to Marius Romme *"Many voices can be unthreatening and even positive. It's wrong to turn this into a shameful problem, which people either feel they have to deny or to take medication to suppress."* Many 'voice hearers' who suffer greatly from their voices, do not readily get all their needs met by psychiatric services; specialised *Hearing Voices Groups* aim to support voices hearers who want to understand and work with their voices, whether they are positive or

negative and to learn new coping skills.

Voices Vic has run *Hearing Voices Groups* since 2005 and is proud to support other organisations, across Victoria, to create opportunities for collaboration and recovery; we work in partnership with other *Hearing Voices Networks* in Australia and overseas. Our groups were created as a response, to the growing understanding that shaming people who hear voices doesn't enable them to live decent lives. Forcing a label on a person, or forcing him/her to agree that they have a mental illness and that there's no cure isn't helpful and certainly does not give any hope to thrive, which is why 70.9% of people, diagnosed with psychosis have inadequate and unsustainable recovery outcomes. 'Voices hearers' lives become full of repeated hospitalisations, loss of personal freedoms (involuntary treatment), powerful medications, debilitating side-effects of psychiatric medicines (obesity, diabetes, tardive dyskinesia...), reduced life expectancy, frequent fear and distress, social isolation, unemployment and extensive poverty, unsafe or unstable housing, stigma and discrimination, pervasive hopelessness.

Hearing Voices Groups fill a void in the services other groups offer; it is a human need to have conversations, about what is happening or

felt to be going on in one's life. There is also a strong need in humans to be heard, to gain some kind of understanding, connection and validation when talking about feelings, beliefs and circumstances. For people who hear voices, these needs are no different; after all, voice hearing is a normal human experience and understanding that a person's voices are **real** is essential to giving him/her enough respect to live a decent life and connect well with his/her community. Acknowledging that the voices are real and building relationships with them are key components of a *Hearing Voices Group*.

In *Hearing Voices Groups*, all beliefs are accepted based on the diversity of humanity and its various cultures and contexts and individual needs. The beauty of *Hearing Voices Groups* is in sharing that diversity, allowing for people to say what works and doesn't work for them when trying to cope with their voices. Speaking in first-person terms and acknowledging one's own beliefs, rather than using second- or third-person modes to describe someone else's experience, allows people to speak their own truth and avoid imposing on another's belief.

Groups recognise that 'voice hearers' are experts in their own experience and that recovery is not necessarily the absence of voices, but the ability to live a meaningful life with minimal distress. Groups need to be safe and inclusive spaces, in which 'voice hearers' can share experiences, learn new ways to understand, cope and live and create a powerful sense of hope and possibility. Hundreds of *Hearing Voices Groups* exist around the world, in which 'voice hearers' support each other to make meaningful recoveries on their own terms.

Starting a group in your community

Starting a *Hearing Voices Group* does take some organising, as well as tenacity, understanding and/or training in the voice hearing experience, empathy and commitment. At Voices Vic, we have two facilitators, one of whom at least is a 'voice hearer.' Groups transition to being facilitated by 'voice hearers' only. Our experience is that well-working groups meet weekly; group members are not expected to turn up every week, so sometimes as many as 25 different people will attend a group over the period of a year, but not all at once. In our experience, anywhere from 3 to 12 members can work well as a group.

It is up to the group to decide whether to make the group a closed group, or not. There are a number of *Hearing Voices Groups* that are closed, mostly in hospital out-patients settings. The middle of the week is a good day for a group to meet (so support is available next day) and it's best not to run groups too early or too late in the day (4pm - 6pm or 1pm - 3pm often works well). Groups generally run for about 1½ hours, followed by socialising (30 minutes at a coffee shop). Meetings are best held in the community, a library, a neighbourhood house or community hall rather than a mental health service.

It is really important to provide a safe place for 'voice hearers' to get together, so that they can explore their voice hearing experiences. When looking at potential meeting places think about:

- What is the space we want to create?
- What does the space do for 'voice-hearers'; for people?

- What's on walls? (This is important when the environment is a non-specific space, such as a library.)
- Time of day the space is available? (Think about effects of medication and other issues such as night travel.)

When deciding on who will facilitate, bear in mind that a greater connection and understanding exists between people with similar experiences; 'voice hearers' have been often experienced severe discrimination, for talking about their experiences, by those who don't hear voices. That's why having a facilitator, with lived-experience, can mean the difference between some 'voice hearers' being able to speak or not at all. Trust can take a long time to grow in a group where the facilitator does not hear voices. If you think about a women's group being facilitated by a man, or cancer survivor group being facilitated by someone who has never experienced cancer... you'll recognise the strong need, for at least, one facilitator with lived-experience. So there is a preference for having a 'voice hearer' to facilitate a group, rather than someone who just has some other experiences and good empathy/listening skills, but who cannot really relate to voice hearing; Voices Vic, however, does not have a strict rule on this.

Developing and Communication within the Group

In the words of Jacqui Dillon (chair of the UK Hearing Voices Network):

"The aim of the group facilitator is to lead by listening. This means that, wherever possible, the group as a collective makes decisions about direction, activities, changes, etc. It is the facilitator's role to enable this

process. A key part to this role is to magnify the voices of people who are not normally listened to, by emphasising the belief that each person in the group has a deep wisdom and expertise about ways of managing and dealing with problems."

The group offers an opportunity to develop skills, beliefs and supports, as well as to explore and understand voice hearing experiences. Its focus is on social inclusion, also acting as a support network. The facilitator's role is to create a safe space, to explore voice hearing amongst peers, to draw out experiences, enable discussions, while providing validation and normalisation, with the group holding the wisdom. The normalisation of the voice hearing experience, for the 'voice hearer,' is an extremely powerful experience, often beginning the recovery journey.

People who hear voices, generally have been made to feel ashamed and afraid of themselves; their core-beliefs have been vilified, their personality has been called "*disordered*" and "*diseased*". It's a lot for a 'non-voice hearer' to understand, because so much of what a voice hearer has tried to talk about previously has been shut down and declared to be nonsense. It is wonderful when people, who don't hear voices, make an effort to understand, be open and willing to listen and recognise what is needed: a willingness to learn, without Band-Aid-methods and bigotry creeping in. For instance, telling someone they "*don't make sense*", is a judgemental phrase that doesn't enable a person to communicate, rather aggravating his/her despair. Instead, a facilitator should try to find out what does make sense, or admit needing extra help in understanding what was meant.

The impulse for facilitators to solve a problem or rescue someone in distress is well-meant – but in a voice hearing group, experiences are shared and different members' coping strategies are listened to. Individual members will test or try other suggested coping strategies and see what works for them. The group empowers members, building a tool box of coping skills others in the group can use. When rescuing someone, we put them in the role of victim and take away opportunities to build skills and self-esteem.

What is unique about voice hearing groups?

A variety of experiences

'Voice hearing' is not limited to one type of experience, such as verbal, sound-related intrusions on a person's identity; groups will talk differently about other unusual experiences, e.g. some will discuss sense-memory intrusions, with others talking about their spiritual nature. A huge variety of experience makes up the unique nature of 'voice hearing' groups.

Voices are often symbolic and can manifest visually, through tactile means, through taste or smell or all those senses; if words or sounds are heard, the tone is often what affects 'voice hearers' most. Emotions are often a very distressful part of hearing voices, although they can also contain elated or comforting emotions, essential to coping with social hardships. Likewise, being distracted by voices can allay loneliness but can also prevent a person from having a successful career, self-esteem is often a point of discussion in *Hearing Voices Groups*. There are many different ways of interpreting particular voices, each experience being unique to

the individual experiencing it; there are, however, many similar experiences and opinions that 'voice hearers' find useful to have discussions about.

What's fairly normal for a 'voice hearer' is that, commonly, people think they are in need of the CAT team, a threat which can make people simply close up. This is why it's a great relief for many 'voice hearers,' attending *Hearing Voices Groups*, to know that they will not be subjected to an over-the-top panic, when mentioning something, they probably wanted to talk about for years, but feared the consequences. Voices Vic groups have never had to call for assistance; we work together to reduce the stress of hearing voices through validation and enabling people to recognise their boundaries. For facilitators who don't hear voices, it is recommended to have some training in working with people who hear voices.

The Hearing Voices Approach

1. What is unreasonably taboo to talk about in mainstream society is what *Hearing Voices Groups* have conversations about.
2. The *Hearing Voices Groups* are open to anyone who hears voices or has other sensory experiences that other people do not. The two most important beliefs or values of the group are that, the experiences a member has are real and that we are not there to, necessarily, get rid of the voices.
3. In a *Hearing Voices Group* there are no observers. Facilitators, carers or visitors, who come regularly to a group, should tell their stories about their experiences, with people in their lives who hear voices; this gives the group an inclusive feel and can add an aspect of normalising some day-to-day

experiences that everyone has whether 'voice hearer' or not.

4. Confidentiality is a must; what is said in the group stays in the group. Having this value repeated, when new members enter the group, reinforces a sense of trust, allowing people to have conversations they may never have felt safe to have before. The feeling of being safe to talk can take time for some group members and there are no expectations on members to share with the group till they are ready to.
5. Group members can explore new ways of coping and living, the aim being not to get rid of voices but to explore ways they can best live with them. Some benefits of coming to a *Hearing Voices Group* may include: feeling less alone; increased confidence and mastery over voices; increased understanding of voices; new strategies to reduce distress; opportunities to support others as well as receiving support.
6. Understanding that the voices are real, on whatever basis the voice hearer wishes to discuss them, is essential to the *Hearing Voices Approach*. Voice hearing being real means that the content of voices often contains clues to resolving feelings of distress: traumatic life experiences; emotions due to social circumstances; time of year or memorable days relating to grief; metaphorical/symbolic unresolved guilt, shame and victimisation.
7. Talking about coping strategies is part of every group and some sessions can explicitly focus on a few different strategies and test them out. Facilitators can source coping

strategies from the Voices Vic website or any of the Hearing Voices books and bring lists of strategies to the group to discuss and try out, get the group to generate their own strategies, or extract them from recovery stories.

Catering for everyone through Group Values

Group facilitators provide a place where people primarily meet to discuss their voices, coping strategies and how they are travelling; members should be allowed to talk about what they most need to have a conversation about. The facilitator needs to ensure the groups remains focussed on their purpose and does not 'go off topic', as members know they are meeting to talk about voices, which are quite often related to other aspects of a person's life.

Most groups benefit from jointly agreeing, in the first week, on group values; they create a sense of safety through boundaries and facilitators can feel that something the group agrees on, is in place to make everyone feel more comfortable about sharing their experiences. A big part of the facilitator role is finding the right balance. Catering for everyone, though, is not without difficulties, especially given that the telling of some causes of hearing voices can act as a trigger to other 'voice hearers.' Discussing ways of talking about abuse, neglect, being bullied and institutionalisation, without going into too much detail, is often incorporated into the values the group establishes. Ways of letting facilitators and group members know when a story is becoming upsetting, should also be discussed; for example, a group member would just move their chair a little back from the circle if feeling upset.

This is a basic and safety-first discussion: how do we look after ourselves and group members? It should be something everyone is happy with. Giving power to and understanding of members to ask for time-out, in a way that feels appropriate and natural to them, means they don't have to be alone in their suffering.

Building rapport, support and equality

Facilitators, while being central to the group and often also a 'voice hearer', should not dominate but rather reflect on topics already chosen by members. In balancing the facilitator role, Voice Vic suggest about 80% devoted to a **supportive focus** (draw out experiences and discussion; provide validation and normalisation; be a role model in respecting differing beliefs; ensure people feel included and safe) and 20% to a **guiding focus** (introduce new ideas and strategies from the *Hearing Voices Approach*; do creative explorations in artistic media; use informative/educative content, including short stories or information from books, DVDs/internet about recovery - sharing stories such as these is a great way to get the group talking.)

Topics of interest arise from group members and can easily be followed up; it is important that facilitators allow the group to flow. The most important element is giving 'voice hearers' the opportunity to be heard; they should be encouraged to bring in their own art work, music, writing, or skills such as juggling to show other group members. Some 'voice hearers' may not want to share their experiences, which is okay too, because even listening to others share their stories will bring benefits. Never pressure people to talk if they don't want to, but ask questions if

people seem to need encouragement to speak (e.g. what have the voices been saying this week? Any changes in the voices this week? Any particularly difficult or successful situations with voices this week? What's your past experiences with voices? Want to reflect on anything from what the group has been saying?)

Grounding

There are good reasons to have two facilitators, first and foremost to have someone who can step outside with someone who needs some one-on-one time; this gives a person some privacy and time to talk through things or sit with a facilitator, knowing they care enough to spend time, making sure they get what they need to cope with what's overwhelming them. While this is happening, the co-facilitator is available to take care of the group process.

The facilitator's job is to listen, not only with their ears but with their eyes and anything else that makes sense; if a group feels 'discombobulated', it means that it's time to move about a bit. A shake out of limbs, doing a stretching exercise can get people grounded in time and place once more. This can be followed by a discussion about different ways of making sure we stay present; looking around at the building walls, or at the faces of people around you, moving the body, or using a stress-ball or plasticine to squeeze, are common methods to get grounded in the moment.

Having two facilitators is not only useful to assist a group member, but also in case one facilitator is unable to make it at the last minute or is running late. It is also important that facilitators have someone to debrief with, a role usually played by the co-facilitator. This assures confidentiality

while sharing any stress related to facilitating the group. By supporting each other, facilitating becomes an easier and more comfortable task. Mistakes do happen, but it helps if they can be talked through, so that people can move on rather than repeat them. Really, the worst mistake any facilitator can make is not to be him/herself.

If, for some reason, it is not possible to talk to a co-facilitator for a few weeks, one might try to debrief by writing a few notes, asking the following questions: How did it go? What was the participation level of the group? What themes emerged? What did you say that you wish you hadn't? What didn't you say that you wish you had? Is there any follow-up to be done? What are you going to do to take care of yourself in the next 24 hours?

Whether groups are facilitated by a worker, a 'voice hearer' or both, Voices Vic provides training and support, in the *Hearing Voices Approach*, to facilitators and they can debrief with the Voices Vic's Network Co-ordinator.

Overcoming fears of facilitating groups

Unusual experiences are fairly normal to the group, which is why they need to be opened up and explored rather than shut-down; it helps to engage group members in conversations by asking open questions and avoiding judgements: how has your week been in regards to your voices? Were the voices louder or softer? Did you notice any changes? How have you coped?

Other people in the group are likely to have similar experiences or would be able to relate; this, in turn, will help members to validate and normalise their experience - reducing distress. It doesn't matter what people believe - it does matter that

they have the opportunity to explore; facilitators can't make sense for them but can provide opportunities to do so.

It is not uncommon for a new member, joining a Voices group, to experience their voices becoming more active; welcoming their voices to the group is a good way of approaching this as groups are not about getting rid of the voices (although this may happen for some); it is about working with and understanding the relationship people have with their voices. Group wisdom enables the individual, to potentially see other points of view or, ways of explaining their perception, so their conversation can be more readily acceptable outside of the group. Everyone should be allowed to have a say, be heard and their perception must be validated.

While organisations running groups should make their own list of appropriate emergency numbers, it is useful to do this in consultation with group members, so they can nominate contacts. When someone is thought to be at risk of suicidal or violent behaviour, outside of *Hearing Voices Groups*, "Duty of Care" is often used as a reason for breaching confidentiality and contacting the CAT team, police or psychiatrist. Discussions about suicidal and violent voices can be common in *Hearing Voices Groups*, but it doesn't mean confidentiality should be breached on a regular basis; disclosing personal information can be a breach of UN Charter of Human Rights; we need to remember that:

- Someone hearing a voice making violent threats doesn't constitute a duty of care issue. People hear violent voices all the time without taking any action.
- People can intend to carry out violent actions and give no signs at all.

- Breaches of confidentiality are one of the greatest concerns of 'voice hearers' and can severely damage trust.

When a group member says "*the voices tell me to kill people*" or "*the voices tell me to die*", it's about context, rather than the words themselves. If a person has heard such voices for years and did nothing harmful, be respectful of what the person is actually saying and don't jump to conclusions, informed by totally different contexts you may have been part of at another time. Where possible, let the group discuss what might be going on for the person; in many cases, other members may have had a similar experience. Voices are often *metaphoric*; it's not the person that has to die but it can be something about him/her - some behaviour or some characteristic.

If the person needs some one-on-one time, one facilitator can leave and have a chat with the 'voice hearer' and listen, asking questions that allow him/her to talk through things to the point where they can gain some ground, through their own volition, as to what's really going on. The group member may want the support of a CAT team or ask the facilitator to ring a friend or just need the space to be listened to; being open to all possibilities is crucial.

To give an example; in one 'voice hearer's' experience, the voices said she wanted to die and that she wanted to kill everyone and these voices occasionally also would come out of her mouth. If people were present, she would immediately apologise, saying that's not what she wanted to say. She realised these voices came from several different places, tangled into one, including a suicidal and threatening parent, an abusive partner, films and computer games. They were not her opinion, they were things around her in

society that upset her or made her feel like she had at those times in her life where she'd been cornered and threatened. She felt blamed for these thoughts because she couldn't stop them. By challenging the voices, looking at the feelings behind the voices, the imagery and the subtext and talking this through with others, she was able to reconfigure the voices and use their energy for other purposes, instead of letting them get in the way of her ability to work.

Facilitators could ask members to share whether they had tried challenging a voice themselves; challenging helps people to see that voices don't always tell the truth and that they have more power than the voices. 'Voice hearers' are more likely to be victims of violence, rather than perpetrators and what voices say is often symbolic, not literal. As with suicide, people are safer if they are able to express and explore frightening thoughts. Groups can help to normalise, challenge and get control of violent voices, because the power of voices reduces when people share.

Talk about what group members have been doing lately; ask about life experiences, including conversations about bullying, alienation, loneliness and stigma. Strategies giving validation to important emotions, such as helpful and useful ways to express anger or grief, assist in finding alternative understandings of these scary voices. New and acceptable interpretations can bring the 'voice hearer' some relief. Should a participant raise issues regarding suicidality or increased distress, facilitators should be trained and supported to assist participants in finding appropriate extra supports and/or crisis services outside the group. Voices Vic provides resources, training and ongoing support for referrals where needed.

Endnotes

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