

Talk to me and I'll talk to you

I'm Marina from Greece and I'm 31 years old. I've been a member of the Greek Hearing Voices movement for a year and take part in a self help group in Athens. The Greek network was set up after the visit of members of the UK network. By participating in the network, I've felt no pressure and found some great friends. I think the network can provide voice hearers and mental health workers with answers and ideas.

I've been hearing positive and negative voices since 2008. They've totally changed my life and I know that things will never be the same. I can't say that everything has been going bad, but I have definitely changed my point of view on many things and my way of dealing with some situations in my daily life. When I walked into the world of voices I was totally and uncomplainingly cut off from all activities and the reality of my everyday life. Even when the voices became bad advisors or kept me "locked in memories", I found the experience magical and thrilling. The voices had my full interest. I used to go to work but not work, spend time with friends and family without actually being there with them and wasn't able to sleep when I closed my eyes. I spent all my time talking to the voices, explaining my actions, choices and everything about me, or making fun of them. I also used to tell them "good morning" when I woke up.

I used to live between two worlds that were separate from each other. I almost lost my job which I love, couldn't return friends' and relatives' attention and kept trying to look "normal" and not burdening them with any strange behavior. These people were the main reason why I started realizing that I see visions and hear voices with whom there are so many things to say and do, but I'm also a daughter, a sister, a friend and an employee. The existence of these two worlds doesn't represent anything supernatural to me, but something that takes you away from your place and time. I had to stop living only with the voices and reclaim the life I had forgotten. My main thought was "I may be fortunate or unfortunate to hear and speak with voices, this may be a fascinating world, but is it the only thing I want?". I must say it's not easy to "disconnect" from all this, but I discovered coping strategies that helped me be less distracted, influenced, angry, afraid or nervous because of the voices and people's reactions.

Voices may not seem real to those who don't hear them, but to me they're a reality I should cope with. There are voices that can be really annoying; some of them want to make me believe something bad is going to happen to a significant other. They may say they're going to torture my brother and then such a negative image comes into my mind. I soon realized my feelings are connected to images, so if I created my own positive images, or lied and told them that the person in their negative images wasn't my brother, I wouldn't feel intimidated. There are other voices that try to force me to do things. They may appear out of the blue or when I have an argument with a person I dislike and they ask me to kill. I've learnt to be vigilant and capable of anticipating their words. I've managed to imagine situations where "to kill" can only stand as a metaphor. For instance, I imagine I'm hungry and tell the voices "ok, I'm hungry but I don't have to kill in order to eat". I also play with the words they provide. They may say: "I'm very angry when you don't listen to me" and I reply: "Ok, I see, you're hungry, too. I'll order something for you, too". It's better to cause confusion than engage in a murder conversation with them. Then the "killer voice" becomes like a little child who can't get their own way.

I also like something like role playing. For instance, I tell the angry voices I'm a psychiatrist and I it's clear they behave this way due to unresolved adolescence issues. I sometimes tell them I'm a rabbit: "Do you know you are just talking to a rabbit? Can you leave me alone and not eat my carrots?"

Ok, I know I've used some lies to deal with the voices, but as a great saying goes, "the end justifies the means". When the "killer" voice was persistent, I lied more and said things like: "Ok I did it... you were right... you know that I m going to prison now because I was caught ". This strategy can be a little dangerous because there are other voices that are ready to blame you or some bad picture will pop up in your mind again... but you know why you said this and you are not a killer, you know that you are not going to kill anybody. The voices that blame you for the murder can become your allies and a source of knowledge if you explain another voice tried to force you to kill and lying by admitting you did it was your way to get rid of the bad voice.

What I suggest is to use imagination! Voices do that... They use fantasy so as to connect with me. I feel they live there and if you want to beat them you have to deal with them in their own space or world. I used fantasy... Over time, I've managed to do it with measure and wisdom. Voices are found in our fantasy...Fantasy is not something fake, but rather a special and private space for every one, even for those who don't hear voices... It is difficult to hear voices because what they do is to intrude in our thoughts and fantasy... I mean they are not someone talking on TV or radio, letting you change channel... or turn it off! I found or created places in my fantasy and mind which the voices could not penetrate, break or destroy... It is said that attack is the greatest form of defense... My attack plan was to create places within the general world of fantasy, I created some good and some bad places. I sometimes used to invite the positive voices just to play cards, backgammon or dance... in fantasy everyone can be everything he wants... I can be brunette, blond, red hair, I may know karate, navigate an airplane, or to be a magician or a kid...

I've also used fear to repel the voices and sometimes managed to frighten voices by sharing the following picture with them: I imagined the figure of the voice I heard standing on the edge of a cliff ready to fall. Now I can send them fear without having to create such images in my mind. Having said that, there are voices that can cause so great fear that makes the heart beat fast. I used to tell them: "I'm not afraid of you, my heart's beating fast because I'm exercising".

In this battle of imagination you have to be fast, creative, funny...It's something that has not finished yet... I sometimes lose, other times I win... I used to keep track of the score in the past... how many times the voices managed to frighten me... and how many times I frightened them.

Maybe it sounds totally crazy, but I created all the aforementioned scenarios being in full senses and aiming at one target: To fool, to slip and to control my mood and my imagination against the voices. Our space of fantasy has to be crystal clear... so that we can create nice pictures, scenarios and use it for our own good.

It's important to prevent the voices from controlling and intervening in one's thoughts. I've seen that my memories and past experiences became the source of their power over me. I'll never be able to tell how they made me reveal every little secret to them, about bad things that had happened to me or I had done my little frauds or sins. At first I avoided the voices by not admitting anything, but after a while all my memories came to the surface and it was exhausting to feel I had to give a report. So, my next step was to create a map of all my memories and tried to find the good ones and speak only

about them. However, as bad moments were a part of my life, too, I unwillingly remembered whatever had left its mark on me. I sometimes woke up with a bad memory and the voices' comments about it. For quite a long time the voices seemed to hold the keys to my return to the past and I felt powerless against them. A good idea was to get some help from the positive voices I also heard. They distracted the bad voices by pretending they were the persons my memories were about and offered me time to work on my past experiences and whatever bad had happened. Truthfulness and admission were the first steps to busting loose from being locked in memories. When it was time to move on and stop dwelling on a bad memory, the positive voices sent me a sign.

It was also helpful to say a few words like short poems which became my prayers, offering energy and power. The results were brilliant. I now have my own words against bad voices and bad memories. My internal voice is much more powerful and higher than the other voices. I'm not religious and don't often go to church, but I acknowledge the power of prayer to the God we all find within ourselves and maybe this inner human God doesn't want us to suffer or feel either psychological or bodily pain which is tormentingly caused by the bad memories.

I'd like to say a few words about our internal voice. We all have one! It's the voice we use to solve a crossword or a sudoku, when we read a book or when we bring a past conversation to mind. A nice exercise in order to find and empower our internal voice is to work with our breathing. We breath in and out. If you try to hold your breath and instead of sending it out, direct it to a part of your body, you may feel a shivering there. The next step is to send the air somewhere in the room you find yourself and then you can send it to one of your fantasy places. You can then send it together with some words, such as "are you talking to me?" or "catch me if you can". You may think this is not heard, but there's something out there and it's your internal voice. I'd also like to return to the sudoku example; can you locate the internal voice or thought that provided you with the solution? Most probably it comes from within yourselves. If you concentrate on this feeling while you're breathing out and release some words, you'll send your internal voice wherever you wish, you can guide it with your thought and your imaginary breathing out. After that, you can place yourself in a scene and imagine you raise your hand and say "Stop" to another voice that's approaching. This can create some distance between you and the voice. Imagine you have created a safe space around you, which is like a strong and impermeable wall to the voices.

Whenever a voice wants to make me feel fear or pain, I use my imagination to move myself to another place where the voices cannot reach me. I also use my imagination when negative voices take over and make me feel they've stolen my internal voice. Having given myself and the voices time by observing them, I can now prepare a proper welcome to them when they visit me and thereby gain their friendship or respect. As for the bad voices, when I know they're coming, I disempower them and make them look fool by imagining they wear funny clothes or carry funny items on their hands.

I have talked about some of my coping strategies, which I hope can make sense and be helpful to other people. By discussing with other voice hearers I have found out that we have many different ways of dealing with this experience. Everyday activities such as drawing, clay craftwork, exercise and sports, writing, dancing, or listening to music can also be very helpful. Good relationships also matter: the company of people who don't put any pressure on you and an established good relationship with your counselor, which involves mutual trust and real communication, are such examples.

I'd like to close by sharing with you my concerns regarding medications and a funny story that relates to all this. I can imagine spending the years to come talking with voices as an agent in charge of my life, but I don't want to think that I'm going to take these pills forever. Drugs help me sleep calmly, which is important because I've stayed awake many times talking with the voices. However, I've been finding ways to cope with the side effects of the voices, but the side effects of the drugs are much more tiring and lasting. I guess you know the psychiatric jargon usually uses the term schizophrenia to describe the hearing voices experience. I started taking medications 8 months after the voices began. When I and the voices wanted to gossip and laugh at an annoying voice's attributes we used to say "Help me, the singer is among us", or "help me, the crybaby is among us" and so on. An evening I was returning home from work by bus. It was a hot summer afternoon in Greece and I felt really tired. When the voices started, I used my internal voice to explain I wasn't in a chit chat mood: "Do you know something? I can't stand you anymore, you come whenever you like. I have to take medications because of you; the recipe says these medications are for schizophrenia". A surprised voice then replied: "Medicines for schizophrenia? Does this mean you're a schizophrenic? Help us, a crazy schizophrenic is among us!!!" I started laughing inside me, I thought this was hilarious. Then all the voices started asking what I had done wrong and had to take these medicines and why I was laughing. I couldn't explain to them they were the reason why I was laughing and had to take the medicines, so they thought I was just joking. On the one hand, this incident sounds funny and ironic or even tragic at the same time. On the other hand, it's good to know that the voices would never talk about me like that, as if I were a schizophrenic. They just used the word as a funny nickname for a while. It was my fault but it brought a lot of fun to my relationship to the voices. I found out that I just hear them and they hear me, I just have to be very careful about what I say or show to them! ☺

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