

Greater Manchester West  
Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust



**FOCUS**

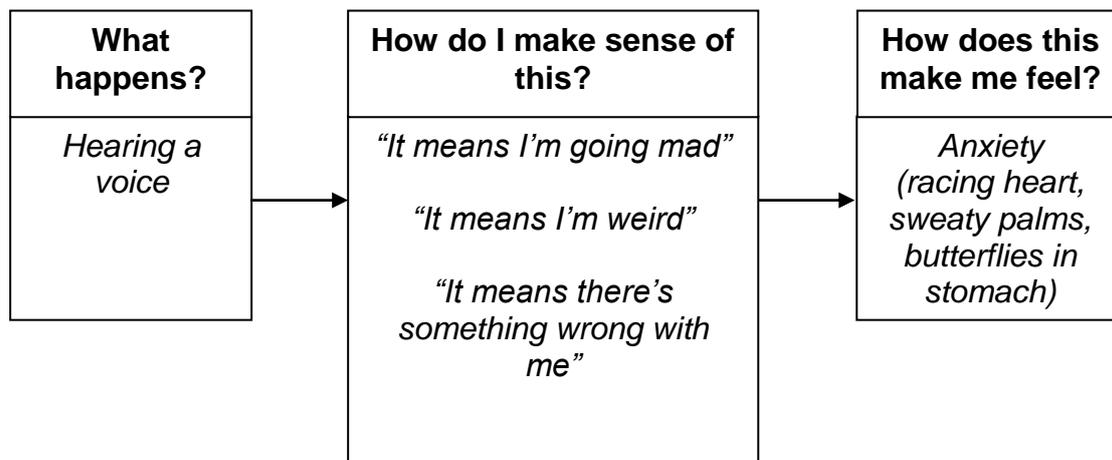
Focusing on Clozapine Unresponsive Symptoms (FOCUS): a randomised controlled trial

# **Hearing voices or other things that may not be there: An information sheet**

# Do you ever hear things that other people cannot hear? Are you worried about it?

## What is it?

Although hearing voices is often associated with mental health problems such as psychosis or schizophrenia, there is lots of evidence that people without mental health difficulties also hear voices. Others worry that hearing voices means they are weird which often makes them feel more anxious and worried.



## How common is it?

- One study found that 10% of people had heard things that other people could not hear. This means about 6 million people in the UK have had this. This makes it twice as common as having red hair! About 5% of people in the UK have red hair.
- One study found that around half of those who lost a loved one had heard them after they passed away.
- Studies have also found that 35-40% of students have heard something that another person has not.
- Some people have these experiences less than once a month. Others have this more often. Some have this a few times a week or more.

The findings from all of these studies suggest that hearing voices is a common experience. However, what can vary between people is how distressing voice hearing can be. Voices are more likely to be distressing if the content is abusive, if they are loud, or present for hours at a time, or if someone believes they are very powerful and they have little control over them. All these things will make it likely that voice hearing will interfere in somebody's life and they may seek help from mental health services.

## Famous people that have heard voices

Many well known people have spoken out about their experience of Hearing voices in the media such as:

- John Frusciante (ex guitarist, Red Hot Chilli Peppers)
- Danny McNamara (Vocalist, Embrace)
- Anthony Hopkins (actor)
- Zoe Wannamaker (actress)
- Sigmund Freud (psychoanalyst)
- Gandhi (father of Indian independence)
- Joan of Arc (French historical figure)
- William Blake (poet)
- Vinnie Jones (footballer/actor)
- Socrates (Greek philosopher)

## What causes it?

Some people say that hearing things that other people might not hear can be a sign of something called 'psychosis'. The term 'psychosis' is often used to refer to a 'loss of contact with reality'. This term is normally only used when the experiences are very frequent, very distressing and affect a person's ability to carry out their usual activities or may interfere with their relationships. Lots of things might cause someone to hear voices. Here is a list of some of them:

- Stress and anxiety
- Feeling very tired
- Depression
- A recent bereavement
- Coping with trauma
- Sleeping problems
- Taking certain drugs (such as cannabis, LSD and cocaine)
- Having a very high temperature or physical illness
- Being on the verge of getting to sleep or waking up
- Dementia (in older people)
- Alcohol withdrawal after a long period of heavy drinking

Numerous research studies show that people who experience traumatic or distressing life events are more likely to hear voices. Some studies have also found that experiencing previous traumatic life events such as bereavement, being taken hostage, physical or sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse can lead to more distressing content and severity of voice hearing.

One study found that 70% of people who heard voices had experienced a traumatic or stressful life event prior to the onset of their voice hearing. This

led them to consider that hearing voices might be a normal reaction to stressful life events and trauma.

A recent review of lots of studies has shown that the link between traumatic events and someone hearing voices is similar to the link between smoking and lung cancer.

## What sort of things do people hear?

- Studies suggest that people hear things like a telephone ringing, sounds similar to the television, pets (i.e. cats and dogs) running round or meowing / barking, scurrying sounds, rustling, people talking / a voice(s), sirens, loud noises, bangs, clanging and many more.
- A recent study of over 1,000 people with no psychiatric history found that 16% of these had heard voices. This would mean that about 10 million people in Britain have heard voices.
- Another study of 17,000 adults found 4-5% of the general population experienced hearing things that others did not hear during any one period. This would mean that about 3 million people in Britain would hear something that others did not every year.

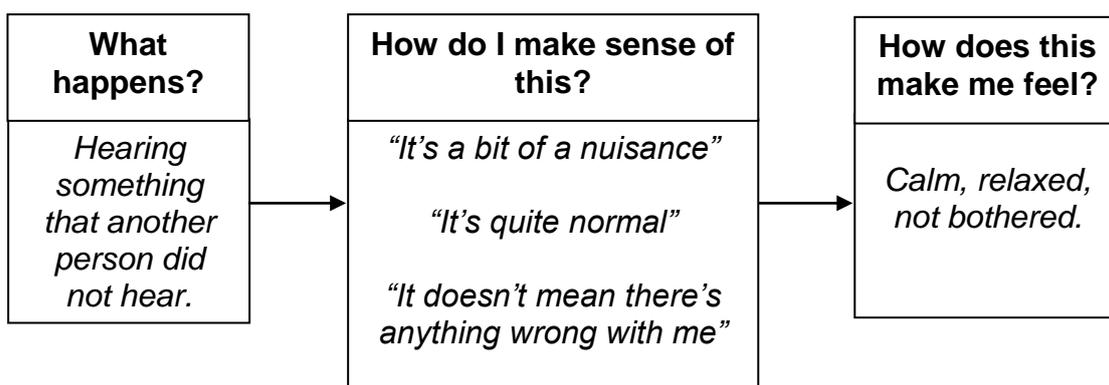
## Is it always upsetting?

- This seems to depend on what types of things people hear, how often they hear them and how distressed they are. Generally, about half of those who hear things that others cannot hear are distressed. Some people are not upset. Some find it comforting or enjoyable.
- Studies have found that the way people make sense of their experiences matters a lot and will depend how upsetting they are for that person.

## So what does all this mean?

It seems that hearing things that other people cannot hear may not be unusual. It's the sort of thing that might happen to anyone. But it seems that the way people *make sense* of what happens is important. This can often be more distressing than the experience itself.

We've found that people are less worried when they learn that others have it as well. They begin to make sense of it like this:



## Should I seek help for this?

We hope the research shows you that hearing things that other people cannot hear is not as unusual as you might think. In fact a lot of people seem to have this. More people have this than have red hair, for example!

Some people find the types of things they hear distressing (e.g. screaming, loud noises or an unkind voice / number of voices). If you are having experiences like this that you find distressing then we think it would be worth speaking to someone like your therapist, care coordinator, psychiatrist or GP to see what help you can get.