

The use of humour and other coping strategies

by

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Everyone's experience of hearing voices is different. In this paper Jon Williams describes the ways in which he has come to live with the voices he hears and how humour plays a vital part. This paper also describes a number of creative coping strategies as well as discussing the influential work of the Hearing Voices Network.

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Initially, I only used to hear derogatory voices. And at times there were a lot of them. I remember being on a ward one day when the nurse told me it was dinner time. I said hang on a minute, and when she asked me what I was doing I told her, 'I'm counting my voices'. She asked me where the voices were and I told her that they were outside in the garden. She asked me how many I could count, and I said somewhere between 16-20. That was a pretty bad day.

There are two ways of hearing voices. One is with your ears as if they are in the room with you or in the garden outside. And the other is when you hear them in your head. It's very difficult to convey what this is like. Imagine going into someone's house. You walk into the kitchen where there is someone you know and they have a go at you for something which you have not done. Imagine standing there arguing with this person for half an hour. Finally, when you

realise this is not going anywhere and you just want to get away, you walk out of the kitchen, out onto the street slamming the door. You are trying to escape, but the argument is still going on. You can still hear the other person's critical voice and you can still hear your own. You can't leave the arguing behind. You can't run from them. They are there with you – everywhere. Or imagine being in a really boring conversation that you just want to escape from, but it is in your head. Nowhere that you go is free from those voices.

When this first happened, I just couldn't believe it. It was a whole new experience. I couldn't explain it, I couldn't understand it, and I didn't really want to try to convey it to others because it seemed so alien. I don't mean that the voices were aliens, although some people think this, but that the experience was so obscure. It was as if it wasn't really

happening but it bloody well was. Why was this happening to me? What had I done to deserve it? When were they going to go away? These are the sorts of questions that people ask themselves for days or weeks or months or years.

Humour

I learnt early on that what was helpful to me was humour. So what I would do, whenever my concentration was okay, was to read joke books and humorous stories. I'd listen to comedy on the radio and watch it on television and I started to make up very bad jokes. What I found was that if I could put a smile on somebody's face, it would make me feel better. The negative voices always take advantage of when I am vulnerable. So the less vulnerable I am the easier my life is. Over years I have learnt how to use humour to overcome feeling so vulnerable. I've researched it almost.

For me, there is nothing much better than being on a natural high laughing with other people. When I am with happy people and the whole place is alive with good spirit, I know the voices will not come. To be honest, I know this really annoys the critical voices.

Even though there are many hard times in life, there are also funny moments. For instance, I remember when I was just boarding a bus and I sat down and started quietly singing to myself a record that was currently in the charts. One of my voices then said, 'Oh no, not that one again'. And another voice chimed in too, 'Yeah, I agree, why don't you sing something else?' So I asked them under my breath, 'Well, what do you want to hear?' And they said, 'Something from Elvis'. In response, I started singing 'We can't go on together with suspicious minds' and they sang along with me. In hindsight I think that was pretty funny. That's the sort of incident that I talk about with others. It was a true and good experience.

Now that I am involved in the Hearing Voices Network I am on the lookout for times when humour can be helpful. But most people who have heard bad voices feel very vulnerable when they first come to the groups so I have to take a lot of care. When I'm taking a distressed phone call, or when I'm first talking to someone about the voices, I tend to be on the serious side. I take time to get to know the person. After a while they might ask me what coping strategies I use in difficult circumstances and that's when I might share some of my stories. I don't introduce them at the beginning though. At first it is all about listening to what the people have to say.

Learning how to cope

I first started hearing voices many years ago and to try to cope with the experience I went to bed for about 4-5 months. I completely shut out life. I remember the morning after about four months of hearing voices that I woke and thought, 'Fine, if you are going to keep swearing at me then perhaps I'll swear back at you'. Shortly afterwards the nurse came in and said who are you talking to? When I said the voices, he said, 'Well can you please keep it down because you're upsetting the other patients'. I didn't know I was talking out loud so I kept it down a bit from then on.

Some people say that you should ignore or not talk back to your voices, but this didn't work for me. Over those four months of maintaining my silence, I had just become more vulnerable, more depressed and helpless. My voices were bullies and by not saying anything back to them, they began to dominate me. They knew I was vulnerable and would keep putting me down. I had to turn and speak up for myself and when I did so, this surprised the voices. But it's different for everyone. We all need support in finding our own ways to respond.

Knowing what it's like when the voices really get going helps me to speak to other people about their experience. One day I remember taking nine distressed phone calls. Sometimes we even get calls from other countries from people who simply want to be able to talk to another voice hearer. The shortest distress phone call I have taken is about 20 minutes, while the longest was about an hour and 45 minutes. When someone rings, first of all I just listen. After about two to three minutes I tend to say that I am also a voice hearer, which sometimes shocks people because they have thought that they were the only one. Often then the conversation changes and the person feels free to talk about the more extreme or difficult aspects of their life. I tend to find that what the person initially wants is understanding. Once they know that I am a voice hearer then they will ask questions about how I cope, how I go about things, how I live with hearing voices. So then I might share some of my coping strategies and then I would ask about their own.

Everyone's situation is different

No-one hears the same voices. Some say they know the person whose voice it is. Some say they are people who have passed on as it's quite common that people begin to hear

voices after someone has died. Other people say that they don't know who the voice is. Some people hear male voices, others hear female voices, some hear both, and some voices are not of a specific gender. Some of the voices can be hostile, others can be friendly, or there can be a mixture. Good voices can cheer you up, mine even tell me jokes sometimes. Some people only hear one voice, some hear many. Everyone's situation is different.

This means that we need different groups too. We have recently started a women's group, and also a group in the Chinese community. All of the groups are based on trust. What is said within those four walls stays within those four walls. The biggest group we've ever had is 34 people and we only had 32 chairs so two people had to sit on the floor, but they didn't really mind. Sometimes you get no people at all turning up to a group and that's usually when there's about two feet of snow on the ground, or when the sun is blazing and they are all out sunbathing – which is okay so long as you're not on chlopromazine!

Progress

We have seen the groups make a difference in people's lives and that is what is satisfying. Some people have come to the group and then gone back to college. Others have even gone onto university. Once people discover they are not the only one, and that there are ways of living with voices, then they can work to find the ways of living they have longed for.

We've seen progress in other ways too. We'd been up and running for about six months before we heard some people in the group say that their community psychiatric nurse, or their approved social worker, had suggested that they visit us. After about nine months we made a further breakthrough when someone said to us, 'My doctor told me to come and see you'. Six months later we had an even bigger breakthrough when we heard someone say, 'My psychologist asked me to come'. And after eighteen months one bloke turned up and said, 'My psychiatrist told me to come and see you'. That's how the group is going. We are gradually moving forward.

In September 1993 there were eight Hearing Voices Support groups and 350 members. Today, in this country alone, we have more than 130 support groups and well over 1,300 members. And we're in the midst of setting up a national phone line so that people will be able to talk to

someone wherever they are. Unfortunately at present we can't have the helpline available around the clock – otherwise we'd just be too tired. If I spent a whole week on the helpline I might need to spend another four months in bed!

I find doing voluntary work for the network extremely beneficial. I've not yet found that I wish to move on. Sure, the work can be intense. Sometimes a phone call makes me feel like getting on the next train to go to the destination where the person is ringing from to help them. Sometimes after a group or a phone call I need to go home and rest for an hour or two on the bed. But when someone rings to say, 'Thanks for your help. I am using these coping strategies and I am not suffering as much as I did', it means a lot to me. There have only been a very few people who have rung up and said the voices have completely gone away, but we often hear from those who are living much better lives thanks to conversations they have shared. When we get those sorts of phone calls, it is better than being in a paid job, although I would like to be in a paid job one day in my life. Just not now.

If I had a chance to talk to someone about the voices on my first visit to the hospital, I don't think I would have paid so many visits since then. I needed to talk to someone but I didn't know who. The staff were kind, they would take me away and play cards or scrabble but no-one was willing to talk about the voices. Over time I became very good at cards and scrabble. In fact, if you want to get out of hospital quickly, the best way is to start beating the staff at scrabble, cards, pool and ping pong! If there had been such a thing as the Hearing Voices Network in those days I would have been on the phone a lot of the time.

I enjoy the life that I am now living. Through the network I have met very good friends, good people, who help me along the journey of my life. As voice hearers talk to one another it helps us find and develop our own coping strategies.

Coping strategies

To deal with paranoia, I use a walkman. If I feel people are talking about me, I can get from one place to another by listening to my own music. This means I can't hear other people's voices which otherwise I might interpret as them talking about me. Another strategy that some people find helpful is to negotiate with the voices. For some people, when the voices come they excuse themselves from present company and pay a visit to the toilet. After making sure there

is no-one around they then say to their voices, 'Look, I can't talk to you now, but if you go away and come back tonight between nine and ten, I'll give you an hour. We can talk then in my bedroom about whatever you want.' This sort of thing works well for a lot of people. But I'm told that it's very important not to keep the voices waiting at the appointment time, because then they can get really annoyed at you.

I have one other coping strategy I would like to share with you. One morning I woke up and decided to go into town. I had a bit of money so I thought I'd go and buy myself some new clothes. Treating yourself can uplift you so I thought I'd head off and buy a new shirt or trousers, or even both. Then I thought I'd come home and have a bath and then get dressed up in my new clothes and go and see some friends. Doing that sort of thing can make you feel better about yourself. It can keep the voices at bay. At the very least, I thought I'd go and window-shop. But as I began to go out of the house, one of the voices from the corner of the room said 'No'. It was a powerful voice, so I went to get a cup of tea and another cigarette to re-gather myself. Having done so, I went to try to leave again when a few voices this time said 'No'. At this point, I looked at the corner of the room and said 'Bollocks, I'm going'. Please excuse my language but that's what actually happened.

So I went into town with my voices really pestering me. There was no-one I could really talk to and there was no-one I knew in town. When I got off the bus, I knew that I had to try to get my voices back under control so I went to a phone box and pretended to dial. As soon as it looked like I could be on the phone to someone I then gave my voices back what they had been giving me, which was a load of rubbish, for about half an hour. Eventually they went into a whisper and I felt as though a weight had been lifted off my shoulder. I then left the phone box and got on with the rest of my day.

There was a side effect to this approach though. People approaching the phone box tended to give it a wide birth, but I tried to think to myself that I wasn't likely to ever see them again. More recently, I have worked out an even better approach ... I decided to buy myself a mobile phone. Now I can talk to the voices whenever I want and people always think that I am talking to someone on the other end of the line. If you can't afford a real mobile phone, you can buy a cheap replica. If I am talking in the street, I still have to be a bit careful with what I say, but it has made a real difference about being out and about.

Each individual is different. What works for me might not work for someone else. But we have found that what seems to be good for everyone is to have a chance to be believed, to talk with others about what the voices say to them and to share ways of coping. I never try to say that I have any answers. For instance when a person says to me, 'I have met a new partner, we have become lovers, when do I tell them that I hear voices?' I can't give an answer to that question. It is different for everybody.

If we were all the same in this world, it would be really boring and I'd spend a lot of time in bed. But because we are all so different I want to get out there and face the world. It is a new day, let's go for it. Sometimes when you are hearing voices though, it is raining every day. You don't wish to venture out. You don't wish to do anything and you just wish to stay under the covers. It's at those times that people need to know about the Hearing Voices Network.

Note

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