

Cannabis and hearing voices booklet

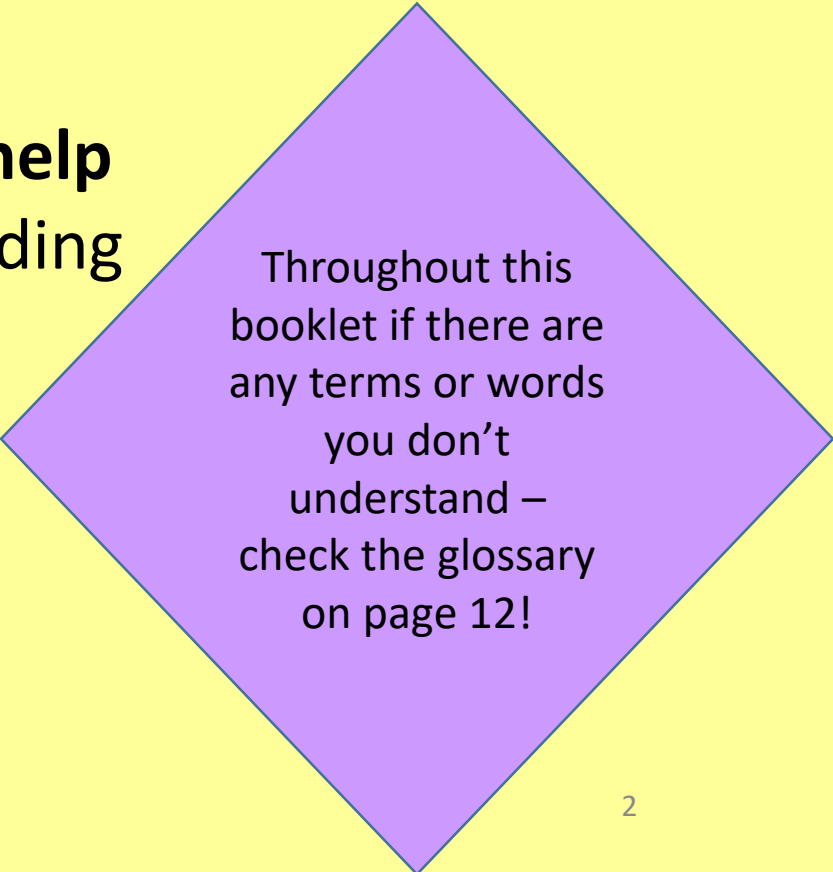
**Written by Nikki Mattocks
For Mind in Camden**



Contents page

- 1 – Front Page
- 2 – **Contents**
- 3 – What is Voice Collective
- 4 – **What is Cannabis**
- 5 – What is Hearing Voices
- 6 – **Why write this booklet?**
- 7 – Cannabis and Voices
- 8 – **Paranoia and cannabis**
- 9 – Other experiences and cannabis

- 10 – **Long term effects**
- 11 – Toolbox and tips for bad experiences
- 12 – **Poem**
- 13 – Glossary
- 14 – **Asking for help**
- 15 - Further reading



Throughout this booklet if there are any terms or words you don't understand – check the glossary on page 12!

Voice Collective

This booklet has been put together for Mind in Camden's London-wide Voice Collective project.

Voice Collective works with children, young people, families and youth agencies across Greater London to help improve the support available to young people who hear voices, see visions or have other unusual experiences.

The information in this booklet has been created by project staff, some of whom have personal experience of living with voices and visions.

If you, or someone you know, would like to find out more about our services, please contact:

Voice Collective, Mind in Camden, Barnes House, 9-15 Camden Road, London, NW6 3SG

T: 020 7911 0822

E: info@voicecollective.co.uk

W: www.voicecollective.co.uk

Twitter: www.twitter.com/voicecollective



What is cannabis?

The NHS say “**Cannabis (also known as marijuana, weed, pot, dope or grass) is the most widely used illegal drug in the UK (1)**”. It can be smoked (most common), eaten or vaped. People usually use Cannabis for its calming and relaxing effects. Cannabis is known for the psychoactive ingredients THC and CBD.

Why do people use cannabis?

For many people, cannabis can make them feel relaxed, chilled out and sometimes a bit hungry (2). However, some people find that particularly with cannabis with higher levels of THC they can experience distressing side effects such as lack of motivation, extreme states, paranoia and anxiety (2).

Due to cannabis affecting the senses (your sense of taste, smell, sound, touch etc.), extra sensory experiences (such as hearing voices, visions etc.) can be heightened which overlaps with what we call ‘psychosis’.

People that use cannabis with a higher level of CBD, are thought to be less likely to experience paranoia and anxiety (2).

The law – Due to the fact that cannabis (THC) is currently a class B drug in the UK, you could end up with a criminal record if caught, however you should know your rights, and to find out more check the further resources.



What is hearing voices?

When we speak about hearing voices, we're talking about people seeing, hearing or sensing things that other people around them don't. Some people have experiences which comfort, inspire or make them laugh. Others have ones that are more frightening and confusing. Many have a bit of both (3).

This experience is different for everyone who experiences it, and different people explain their experiences in different ways.

The medical model (which is the dominant narrative) often uses the term 'psychosis' to describe these experiences, however this approach doesn't always fit or make sense with everyone's experience, so we encourage people to find a narrative that works for them.

Hearing voices can be understood in many different ways; spiritual/paranormal, a gift, 'psychosis' or 'schizophrenia', individual difference, a result of trauma, dissociation, or physical health problems and all of these have a place. (4)



Why write this booklet?

The area of cannabis and hearing voices or “psychosis” has long been dominated by the medical model, producing narratives that can and do make sense for some people.

However, there is a distinct lack of information and resources that have influence from young people themselves, from and for the people that have gone through this first hand.

Also, views in society towards cannabis can be polarized, with some people actively campaigning for its legalisation and others believing its bad for everyone, so we hope this represents a more neutral standpoint, providing information on a rarely discussed experience.

While this booklet will not and does not claim to represent all experiences, we hope it produces a source of information, and understanding of an issue that isn't straightforward.

While we don't encourage people to use cannabis we support a harm reduction approach, and encourage people to contact the organisations towards the end if you want support and further information about what we talk about in this leaflet.



“As someone who's worked in mental health and seen the impact cannabis can have, my view point changed and the way I use cannabis myself for example, I use it rarely on social occasions. I still hear voices but I'm now able to use techniques to manage them in a productive way.”

Does cannabis affect hearing voices?

Research suggests that there is a link between smoking cannabis (especially cannabis with higher THC levels) and psychotic symptoms in young adults (5).

However, most people who use cannabis do not go onto develop ‘psychosis’ or ‘schizophrenia’, and for people who do identify with psychosis and schizophrenia diagnoses, they may have never used cannabis (6).

The conversation around ‘psychosis’ and cannabis often ignores the significance of social and systemic factors in terms of being barriers to wellbeing (7). These factors have been overlooked in the conversation around risk – things such as poverty, childhood trauma and oppression – many of which also increase levels of stress, a known risk factor in ‘psychosis’ (8).

Some young people Voice Collective have talked to have said it can increase the frequency of the voices they hear or change the dialogue or sound. This can mean your experiences can become different in terms of intensity, how distressing it is, and what you're experiencing.

Its important to be aware that using cannabis can interact with some psychiatric medications (tricyclic antidepressants), so speak to your prescriber when using both (9).



I still smoke mainly because with lockdown I don't have anything else to do. I don't know if it was the skunk or the fact I'm dealing with childhood trauma, different people have different opinions, but all I do know is if you have trauma, distressing experiences, then skunk can make it come to the forefront, and it can completely overwhelm you.”

Paranoia and cannabis...

Research by the University of Oxford in 2014 found that using cannabis (with high levels of THC) can cause short-term paranoia . However the study also stressed that paranoia has multiple causes such as anxiety and low self esteem, and the paranoia declined as the THC left the system (10).

Some young people Voice Collective have talked to us say they sometimes can get thoughts that someone else wants to harm them, that other people are interfering with their thoughts and feelings. They may start to believe things that other people might call untrue. They can feel like they're being followed. With this they sometimes get physical effects such as fast heart rate, sweaty palms, shaking etc.

If this becomes more intense after having cannabis, it could help to use grounding techniques in page X and it might be worth considering seeking more information or support.

“When I first smoked it, it was a laugh in the park with a few mates, not a big deal. And it wasn't a big deal for a while. But when I started smoking it multiple times a day it was like everything got louder, a lot more intense, I didn't feel in control anymore, I didn't feel like me.

By this stage I was smoking up to 8 times a day. And I just lost it. I lost all connections with the world and became consumed by distressing feelings. I thought the world was ending and I couldn't trust anyone because my voices became suspicious of everyone.

This section is written based on what Voice Collective understands from their work with young people.

Visions and cannabis...

Some people have found that cannabis can produce an experience of seeing something that others can't see, sometimes for the first time. For other people it can make their visions scarier, more frequent and more distressing.



Multiplicity and cannabis

Some young people have found that smoking cannabis can cause feelings of dissociation, where they feel disconnected from their feelings, thoughts, memories or sense of identity. For young people that experience multiplicity, using cannabis can cause other scarier identities or parts to come to the fore front and it can cause distress.

The other senses... (smells, taste, feeling)

Sometimes using cannabis can cause people to feel hypersensitive in terms of their senses, more than usual. This means for people that can smell, taste or feel what others can't, their experiences may change, or become more distressing.

These experiences are not stand alone and many people experience more than one of these, and a lot of people find they can be connected.

“While I was smoking cannabis I still heard voices, but when I smoked cannabis the voices were almost in the background cos I was too focused on smoking or chasing the next high but once I'd stopped the voices got worse cos there was nothing to distract me with what was going on in my own head.”

What to do if you're having a bad experience...

- 1 - **Talk to someone (family member, friend, or helpline etc.)**
- 2 – Hydration (drink sips of water)
- 3 - **Fresh air (open the window or sit outside)**
- 4 - Sit in a comfortable position (loosen tight clothing)
- 5 – **Breathing (take slow deep breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth, try and be aware of the air going through your lungs, inflating and deflating)**

Also, don't use any more cannabis and don't mix with other substances such as alcohol. Once you feel more relaxed, it may be good to get some sleep, listen to some soothing and relaxing music, or distract yourself.

Grounding techniques/ toolbox

Name:

- 5 things you can see, 5 you can hear and 5 you can feel*
- 4 things you can see, 4 you can hear and 4 you can feel***
- 3 things you can see, 3 you can hear and 3 you can feel*
- 2 things you can see, 2 you can hear and 2 you can feel***
- 1 thing you can see, 1 you can hear and 1 you can feel (1)*

I've smoked probably thousands of times, but I remember one time I had a really bad experience, I totally freaked out. For a while it made my voices so loud, they weren't talking anymore, they were screaming, I was so scared. However I was really lucky to have my friend with me, and she encouraged me to take deep breaths, to sit down, to drink water, and eventually it calmed down.

When thinking about talking to someone you trust, consider;

- Who are you most comfortable with?
- Who has been supportive in the past?
- Who do you think will be able to help you most?

If you're not sure who to talk to, check out page 13 for where to get help/support.

Cannabis can impact other areas of life, not just voice hearing...

Money – Cannabis isn't cheap, especially if you're smoking regularly and using a lot. Sometimes people spend more as time goes on, however this usually improves if you stop.

Relationships – Using cannabis can be a strain on your relationships, especially with different people having different views on it. Cannabis can also bring up anxiety for the people around you because of the potential effects.

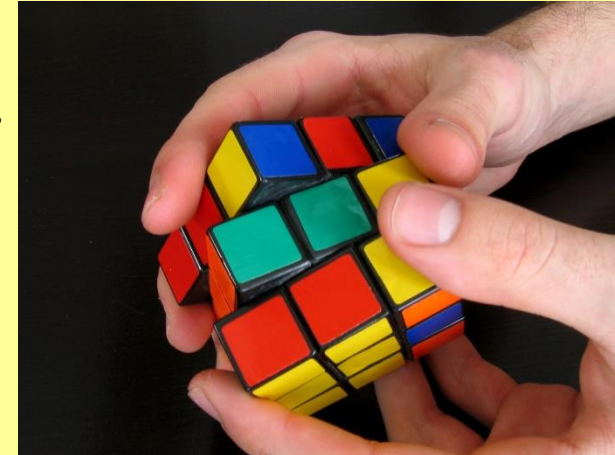
Work/ School – Cannabis can significantly decrease your motivation and concentration, especially while intoxicated, which can mean that you struggle to stay focused at school or work.

Memory – A common experience while using cannabis with higher THC is disruption to short-term/working memory, however this isn't permanent (12).

Physical Health – Often people smoke cannabis with tobacco, and this can cause damage to the lungs, teeth and overall health.

Mental Health – Cannabis (especially skunk) can make people feel activated and at times overwhelmed. As we mentioned, using cannabis with higher levels of THC, can heighten sensory perception which overlaps with 'psychosis'.

Treatment by professionals – If you use cannabis, professionals can sometimes focus on that being the main issue, even if you don't agree.



“When it all started,
It was just a bit of fun,
What I didn’t realise,
Is what it turns into later on.

“its just a plant”,
Is what I got told,
What I didn’t realise,
Is how its grown before its sold.

Lights + chemicals = skunk,
This stuff can get you hooked,
Didn’t think I’d become addicted,
I couldn’t see all that it took.

I was a shell of myself,
Couldn’t stop smoking,
If you think this is funny,
I’m really not joking.

It depends on the person,
My friends are usually fine,
However the voices that I hear,
Become so damn unkind.

Skunk can heighten distress,
I’m not saying that to cause fear,
But I know for me the impact,
On the things I see, smell, feel and hear.”



Glossary

Medical model – The medical model is the way lots of western society look at disability – within a biological context, looking at cause and effect, and often prescribing medications to fix ‘abnormalities’.

Psychosis – ‘Psychosis’ is defined by the NHS as when someone loses touch with reality (13) which might involve ‘hallucinations’ (when you hear or see something that others cant) or ‘delusions’ (when you believe something that other people would say is untrue).

Schizophrenia – ‘Schizophrenia’ is a severe long-term mental health condition (14). It causes a range of different psychological symptoms. Doctors often say schizophrenia is a type of ‘psychosis’.

Skunk - The generic name given to potent strains of the cannabis plant containing the highest levels of the psychoactive ingredient tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).

THC – Tetrahydrocannabinol is a compound in cannabis which largely produces hallucinogenic effects

CBD – Cannabidiol is another compound found in cannabis. Its thought that CBD can balance out the effects of THC.



Asking for help/ if you think it's a problem;

- You can get confidential advice from talk to frank 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from **0300 123 6600**. For people with hearing impairments, you can [Text phone FRANK on 0300 123 1099](https://www.talktofrank.org.uk/contact-us/text-to-frank). **Text 82111** (Text a question and FRANK will text you back).
- Tips & Advice on cutting down - <https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/help-and-advice/advice-you/stop-smoking-cannabis-weed/>
- You can call ChildLine on 0800 1111
- You can text 'Shout' to 85258 to get crisis support
- The Mix - <https://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team>
- 111/999
- GP or health care professional



Further reading and resources

Release – Stop and search (your rights) - <https://www.release.org.uk/law/stop-and-search>

Structural racism and UK drugs policy - <http://yvcommission.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/os-report.pdf>

Social determinants of young peoples health - https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/The-social-determinants-of%20young-peoples-health_0.pdf

A film about skunk, grime and mental health - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeJFKFE3ICM>

