



A STAFF GUIDE TO

HELPING STUDENTS WHO HEAR VOICES THRIVE AT UNIVERSITY



This guide, written by students who hear voices, is aimed at lecturers, tutors and support staff.

**STUDENT
SPACE**



Funded by:

Developed by:

ABOUT

This booklet is aimed at anyone with a role in supporting university students (undergraduate or post graduate). That might include: tutors, lecturers, supervisors, student union staff and those who work in Disability or Wellbeing teams.

Hearing voices or seeing visions is a relatively common experience, affecting between 4 and 10% of adults at some point in their lives. It can be linked to a range of factors, including: trauma and adverse life experiences, a mental health diagnosis, loss/bereavement, spiritual experiences, head injuries, some forms of epilepsy and neurodiversity.

Statistically speaking, it is likely that you've already supported a number of students who hear voices or see visions - possibly without knowing it.

The aim of this booklet is to equip you with some of the knowledge and understanding you might need help students thrive in their chosen course and beyond.



WORRIED ABOUT GOING BEYOND YOUR ROLE?

This guide is part of the equality agenda - intended to help improve access for students who hear voices and help you and your university think through the reasonable adjustments that might make a tangible difference.

For brevity, this guide says little about the diversity of experiences that come under the 'hearing voices' umbrella. If you'd like to read more then check out the sites below.

MORE INFO ON VOICES

Voice Collective:

www.voicecollective.co.uk

Understanding Voices:

www.understandingvoices.com

National Hearing Voices Network:

www.hearing-voices.org

Intervoice:

www.intervoiceonline.org

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Supporting students who hear voices involves being able to see both their strengths and the challenges they are facing. Some of these challenges are linked to the voices themselves, but many arise from the way the university system is configured.

A STRENGTHS FOCUSED APPROACH

Students who hear voices or see visions are, like any other student, full of potential. They will bring with them a range of academic and transferable skills. Some of these skills may have been forged in their experience of hearing or seeing things.

For example, some students may have developed great focusing and multi-tasking skills - especially if they've been hearing voices for a long time and have had to ignore them in order to study. Some may be coming with an open and curious mind, recognising that you cannot take things at face value.

Even when students are struggling, it is important to keep in mind that they also have many strengths that have enabled them to get a place at your university. The reasonable adjustments and support you offer can be part of what enables them to overcome these challenges and complete the course.

"It took me 3 tries to finish my MSc and now I'm a PhD student. Looking back, I was facing multiple challenges. I had the skills to complete each course, but I just didn't know who to turn to for support and didn't want to be seen as a burden"

IN THIS BOOKLET: KEY

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

HOW CAN YOU HELP STUDENTS?

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES STUDENTS MAY FACE

Everyone who hears voices or sees visions is different. Whilst some won't face any additional challenges, others may find that their voices, visions or related experiences cause significant difficulties.

For some, these difficulties may be episodic (e.g. happen during a time of stress). For others these challenges may be ongoing, meaning that they must put in considerable extra effort to meet expected targets.

The following list covers some common areas that can be challenging if someone is struggling with the voices they hear or visions they see. It is not comprehensive or universal - it's always best to check in with the person themselves to identify the areas that are potential blocks.

CONCENTRATION AND ENERGY LEVELS

Some people find that the voices can be distracting, meaning it can take longer to complete tasks. The level of focus needed can be exhausting, meaning burnout is a real risk. It can be hard to listen and retain information in lectures, and busy spaces can feel overwhelming. With so much energy being expended on these tasks, some things can get missed. For example,

some students may struggle to return library books and/or feel unable to mix socially.

DEADLINES AND EXAMS

"It's very difficult to absorb information when your mind is full of the voices. It also upsets me as I'm motivated but the voices block out what I'm trying to do. When my mark was 45 I cried as the voices won. They cheered and mocked when I read my score. Although they also kicked off when I got a 95"

The added pressure of deadlines and exams can exacerbate challenges with voices. For some, it can be hard to plan, revise or meet set deadlines (as the impact of voices/visions may not be predictable). Some may find that the voices comment on their work and leave them doubting themselves.

Whilst asking for extra time and reasonable adjustments is ideal, some students may find this difficult. This can be linked to the additional stigma voice-hearing carries in our society.

"My voices are very triggered by stress/worry. So the more stressed I get the more intrusive voices get and the less I get done. I feel like I'm always studying on "survival mode"

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

STIGMA

"The university did not listen to me or give me an opportunity to try to convey my truth. This led to my distress escalating and a potentially avoidable crisis. I think people not having a basic understanding that taboo and violent voices/experiences are not a certain indicator of 'risk' to others made things worse when I tried to seek support. I became unable to attend lectures/leave my room for fear of persecution and inevitable punishment"

Sometimes the responses of others can make a challenging situation even worse. Voice-hearing is still a stigmatised and poorly understood experience and coverage often unhelpfully and inaccurately links it with violence.

SENSORY OVERWHELM

"I'm diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and Autism. Teaching those around me to decrease sensory input is vital. Dim light, quiet, and not touching me if I'm scared. Having space to isolate is also really important. Having support that knows how to remain calm and help me determine the best course of action, rather

than try to force action and apply pressure"

Voices and visions don't come with an off switch. That means that, if someone is feeling overwhelmed by them, having to deal with other noises/input can be challenging. Some students find having background noise helpful when studying, whereas others need silence. Some people find particular light, patterns or textures overwhelming.

UNIQUE FEATURES

Each student may face different challenges.

For example, some may struggle with being asked questions in class whereas others may thrive on this opportunity.

Some may find crowds and background noise difficult, whereas others may find it a welcome respite from the voices.

Some may be very clear about their needs and how you can assist them. Others may need some time and support to figure things out.

HOW CAN YOU HELP STUDENTS?

Sometimes it's the simple things that can be the most use. This section explores some of the ways you can respond to students who tell you that they are hearing voices or seeing visions.

TIPS FROM STUDENTS

The students who contributed to this project highlighted the importance of the following:

#1 LISTEN & TRY NOT TO PANIC

Whilst voice-hearing may be beyond your comfort zone, if someone trusts you enough to disclose it's important to hear them out. Try not to let your concerns override your ability to listen. If you're not sure about something it's best to ask questions rather than make inaccurate assumptions.

#2 BELIEVE OUR EXPERIENCES

Many of us have experiences of being dismissed or misunderstood. It's important that you believe what we tell you about what we're hearing or seeing. You have different ideas, but that doesn't make our experiences invalid. We know ourselves best.

#3 WORK WITH US TO IDENTIFY CHALLENGES AND FIND CONCRETE SOLUTIONS

Whilst we are entitled to reasonable adjustments, not every student who hears voices will be aware of their rights. Some might be embarrassed or feel like they 'should' just be able to study like everyone else. Your patience and support is invaluable. For ideas see the next section.

TAKE PRIVACY SERIOUSLY

Given the stigmatised nature of hearing voices, it is important that you talk with students explicitly about what information will be shared and what can stay private. Be clear about the rationale for sharing information and, where possible, agree the phrases and details.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

In line with the Equality Act 2010, students who hear voices that can be classed as a disability are entitled to reasonable adjustments. The nature of these depends on the situation, but here are some things students have found helpful.

QUOTES FROM STUDENTS

"I talked to the study counsellors at my university. They were very helpful and supportive and even helped me find other students at my faculty who would help me out or just be social support when I needed it. They also saw to it that I got extra time for exams and so on"

"I was allowed to sit my exams in a separate room within my college (rather than having to be isolated in the quite-frankly terrifying exam building) which meant that my voices were more at ease, as we were on familiar territory. I've personally found DSA a complete game-changer/life-saver! Having weekly mentoring has made a real difference to my postgrad studies and helped me to thrive (nothing about DSA was mentioned to me when my voices escalated/changed

during my undergrad. In hindsight, I would have done much better in exams and felt safer all round, had I been offered DSA at undergrad)"

"I spoke to my moderators before exams so I could walk around. Feeling trapped doesn't help. I had rest breaks. My own laptop - for me it really helps as my thoughts are jumbled at the best of times. I have a sensory kit that goes everywhere with me"

"I need to know where to access support and where to get some kind of centralised mentor. I find I get slung between different services and don't have someone to check in or take charge occasionally when I drop out of sight for a bit"

This is not a comprehensive list as each student's needs will be different.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

IDEAS FOR REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

However, it does give you an idea of some of the things that university's can do to promote equity of access and help students thrive.

PRE-CAMPUS TOURS

Provide tours around campus prior to the start of term whilst it is quiet (this can make the difference between someone having the confidence to attend on the first day, or not).

MANAGEABLE SOCIAL SPACES

Consider flagging social spaces during Freshers Week (and beyond) that are warm, welcoming and likely to be more manageable for those who are feeling anxious or out of place.

LIBRARY ARRANGEMENTS

Making arrangements with the library so that students can have longer loans to take into account the extra time needed to process information. Some students have found it helpful to have a 'drop off' service where their library books can be dropped off at an agreed place when they are struggling to attend the library itself.

IN LECTURES/CLASSES

An agreement to record lectures,

provide slides in advance and/or ensuring lecturers know not to call on a particular student to speak if they find such situations triggering.

DSA AND TECH

Access to necessary software and equipment to increase access. This may include a laptop to type and collate notes, a Dictaphone and/or mind mapping software. This may include supporting access to a Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA).

FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility around attendance requirements. E.g. recognition that attending early morning lectures may be difficult if the person is taking medication with sedating side effects or limits on the number of lectures schedules in one day.

MENTORSHIP

Access to a mentor or supportive person, ideally aware of voice-hearing, that can provide support with motivation, confidence, organisation and/or consolidation of learning.

INFORMATION

Ensure the student knows the

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

processes re extensions before they're needed.

EXAM ARRANGEMENTS

Consideration of the necessary examination environment to enable students to perform to their potential. Some students have benefited from reasonable adjustments including: taking exams in a quiet and private space, being able to walk around

the room, supervised rest breaks, extra time and the ability to bring in particular agreed objects that can be used for grounding or otherwise support the voice-hearer when their voices become challenging. Some students use familiar background music, via an agreed source.

IN SUMMARY

Whilst many students who hear voices successfully complete their studies, we have heard from many who have struggled because of a lack of appropriate support.

Whilst reasonable adjustments won't solve all the challenges some voice-hearers face, they can do some of the heavy lifting and leave students with sufficient energy to manage their studies and day to day life.

If you have any questions about voice-hearing or would like some training on how best to support students please email Voice Collective - info@voicecollective.co.uk.

If you would like to signpost students to information on navigating university life, see: www.studentminds.org.uk and www.studentspace.org.uk.

