

Hearing voices and hallucinations

What are hallucinations?

A hallucination is a sensory experience that occurs in the absence of an external stimulus. For example hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling or feeling something that isn't there.

Many people think that hallucinations, particularly experiences of hearing voices, are a sign of mental illness. This is not always the case.

5 to 15% of the general population report occasional or fleeting experiences of hearing voices. Around 1% of people have complex and regular voice-hearing experiences without the need for psychiatric care.

Slightly higher rates of voices and visions have been reported in older people compared to the general population, particularly for people over the age of 80.

How does it affect me?

Unusual voices and visions are experiences that can occur across the lifespan, but certain factors seem to make them more likely in older adults. These are thought to include:

- **Sensory loss:** Developing problems with one's hearing or vision can lead to certain kinds of hallucination, such as hearing music or seeing strange patterns in the air.
 - **Changes to the brain:** Neurological disorders such as Parkinson's Disease and Lewy-Body Dementia are strongly linked to hallucinations. Often these are experienced as either visual images, or in the form of a "presence" (feeling like someone is close by without being able to see or hear them). Hallucinatory voices sometimes occur as well.
 - **Bereavement and other life changes:** The loss of loved one is followed for some by the persistent feeling of seeing, hearing, or feeling them to be present. A 1993 study of 50 recently bereaved people found that 30% of participants were hearing the voice of their deceased spouse one month after death; 6% were still hearing them 12 months later. There is also evidence to suggest that being isolated socially can make hallucinations more likely to occur.
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My voices and visions are distressing. Where can I get help?

Voices and visions are fairly common and are not in themselves necessarily a cause for concern. If you find that these experiences continue to cause significant distress or interfere with your relationships or daily activities, you should seek the advice of your GP or family doctor and seek other sources of sympathetic support.

In the UK, the [Hearing Voices Network](#) offers information, support and understanding to people who hear voices and those who support them.

[Voice Collective](#) also provides some excellent online resources: these are mostly aimed at young people experiencing voices and visions, but include coping strategies that are useful for all ages.

You might also find it helpful to engage with other people who hear voices, see visions or have other unusual experiences. If you live in the North-East of England, you may find [this map of peer support groups](#) helpful.

How can I help?

Very little is known about what it feels like to hear voices for older people and what kinds of tailored support they might need for help with distressing experiences. You can help to remedy this situation by taking part in an online survey investigating age and unusual perceptions.

The research is being conducted by [Hearing the Voice](#) at Durham University.

They are currently looking for volunteers over 60, including people who haven't heard voices or seen visions before. If you would like to take part, please email [Rebecca Finnigan](#) or [Dr Ben Alderson-Day](#) or telephone 0191 334 8163.

Read more about this [study of age and unusual experiences](#).

Other useful information

More information about voices and visions can be found in these [Frequently Asked Questions](#) produced by Hearing the Voice.

Other useful websites include:

- Alzheimer's Society – [Perception and Hallucinations](#)
- NHS.UK – [Hallucinations and Hearing Voices](#)
- Parkinson's UK – [Hallucinations and Delusions](#)

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Useful Organisations

Hearing the Voice, Durham University

Website: <http://hearingthevoice.org/>

Telephone: 0191 334 8163

Address: Caedmon Building, DH1 1SZ

Age UK England

Email: contact@ageuk.org.uk

Website: www.ageuk.org.uk

Telephone: 0800 678 1602

Address: Age UK, EC3N 2LB

Alzheimer's Society

Email: enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk

Website: www.alzheimers.org.uk

Telephone: 0330 333 0804

Address: Devon House, E1W 1LB

Parkinson's UK

Email: hello@parkinsons.org.uk

Website: www.parkinsons.org.uk

Telephone: 0808 800 0303

Address: 215 Vauxhall Bridge Road, SW1V 1EJ

NHS

Website: www.nhs.uk

Telephone: 0808 800 0303

Voice Collective

Email: info@voicecollective.co.uk

Website: <http://www.voicecollective.co.uk/>

Telephone: 020 7911 0822

Address: Mind in Camden, NW1 9LQ

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