Being the friend, family, partner or carer of someone who hears voices can feel confusing, frightening and isolating. Many carers/family tell us that they receive little information about how to be helpful, and feel really frustrated by this. Many are not even sure how to talk to their loved one any more. This sheet aims to provide some practical help in these areas. Using the philosophy of the hearing voices approach, we recommend two important and fundamental ideas for thinking about voices:

1. Accept that the voices are real. Why? Most importantly, because for us, they are real. Brain imaging studies show that the brain’s primary auditory cortex responds in the same way to voices as it does to noises we all can hear. In other words, it’s a real perception. Denying their reality or advising the voice hearer to ignore them promotes denial - whereas acceptance of their reality gives permission to start actively dealing with them.

Denying the reality of voices is almost like a colour-blind person insisting that red and green are exactly the same colour. It is more helpful and realistic to accept that perceived reality can differ for different people.

2. Focus on helping the person to build understanding & get control, rather than only focusing on getting rid of the voices. Distress and confusion is the real issue, not the voices. In fact, many voice hearers lead fully functioning and successful lives. Many people hear and focus on their positive voices, while others have changed the power balance with the voices, or set strong boundaries with them, or found new ways to interpret and make sense of what the voices say – often to the point that the voices become helpful guides or indicators of life issues. Remember that around 4% of people hear voices, and the vast majority do not need mental health services. Living with voices is very possible.

Many people still mistakenly think that talking about voices will increase the chance of someone becoming “lost in their psychosis”. The reverse is true. Voices are a deeply significant and often distressing experience which people need to share and explore. Not to do so, is simply to leave the person alone in a private torment.

It may be more comfortable for non-voice hearers to avoid opening up these conversations – but it is not in the interest of real recovery.

Self Care
Perhaps the most important message we have for friends, family & carers is self-care. No person can do the recovery work for another, no matter how much we love them. And loved ones – just like mental health workers – need to have adequate supports for themselves, people with which they can debrief, an ability to let go, and a healthy, balanced life.

You can’t do it for us. But you can understand, support and be there.
“It helped me enormously to realise that hearing voices is quite a normal experience, that one can talk about it, and that the voices express what is happening to me.... I no longer feel ashamed about the voices, and I can even talk with my family about it. I can do it because I have changed my mind about it being my fault. I had to say to myself over and over again the opposite: I was not to blame.”


Practical ideas for friends, family & carers

- Attend Voices Vic training
- Don’t be afraid to talk about the voices.
- It can help to think of the voices as just other people in your loved one’s life that you haven’t met. What would you ask if your loved one talked about someone who was bullying them?
- Support the person to make sense of the voices in their own way. It does not matter what explanation someone has for their voices – it just matters that each person does have a way to make sense.
- Encourage the person to set limits with the voices – as they would in any other relationship. For example, only listening to the voices at set times. This takes time and practice, and it doesn’t work for everyone.
- Encourage the person to challenge the truth of what the voices say – sometimes voices lie. Encourage the person to make their own decisions too rather than rely on the voices. It is important to listen and consider what the voices say, but even more important to make one’s own choices.
- Encourage the person to join a group and share their experience with others (this will reduce feelings of stigma). Hearing voices groups are popping up all over Victoria. Contact Voices Vic for more information.
- Ask about the voices – how many do they hear? What gender are they? How old? Are they all frightening or are some of them helpful? Knowing more about the voices helps to build understanding and control.
- Encourage the person to enlist the support of voices, particularly if they hear positive voices. Voices can often become very supportive if asked and respected.
- Remember it can be extremely helpful for the person to talk with their voices – as long as it doesn’t take over every thing else. Some people hold up a mobile phone when talking to their voices – this is a great way to normalise the experience.
- Remind the person that often what voices say is symbolic rather than literal – this can take some of the fear out of the situation and help to make sense of confusing messages.
- Often voices can be associated with something traumatic in a person’s life – and remember that trauma can mean very different things for different people. Often either the content or the characteristics of the voices will relate to these traumas. If this is the case, encourage and support the person to seek counselling for whatever that trauma may have been.

Dr Rufus May suggests that voices are messengers in people’s lives – often pointing to issues which need to be resolved. All too often we try to ‘shoot the messenger’ with medication – without stopping to listen to what the message is, and what it is that person really needs.

Don’t shoot the messenger. Voices hold meaning.