



Three Phases of Voice Hearing

The Startling Phase

“What’s happening to me!”

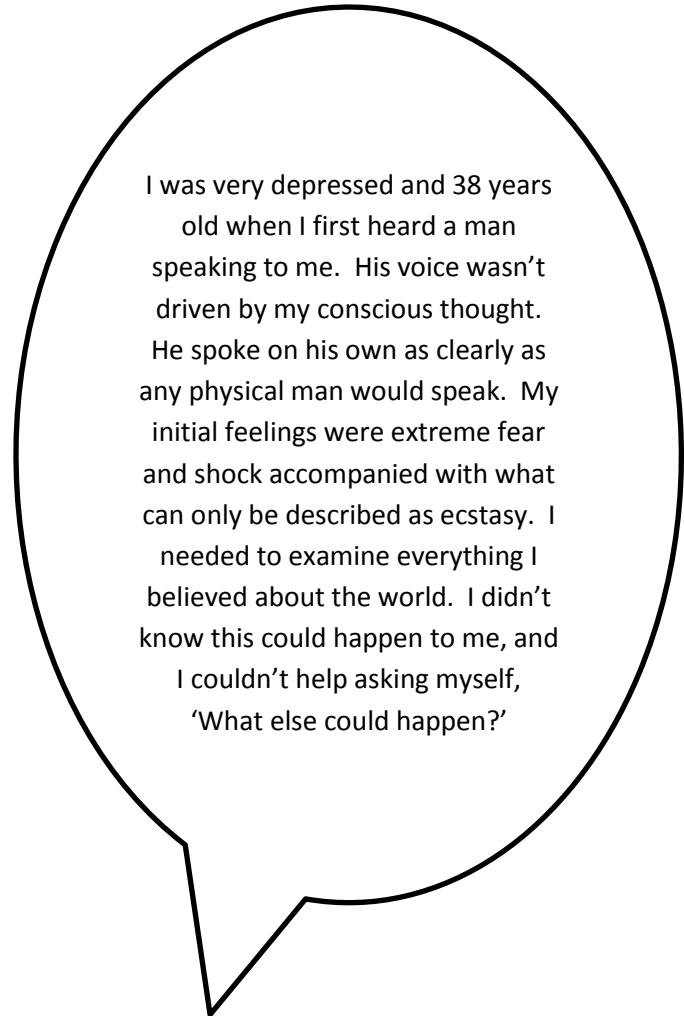
Most voice hearers describe the onset of the experience as being quite sudden, startling and anxiety provoking, and can vividly remember the precise moment they first heard a voice.

The age of the onset of the initial experience of voices varies widely, as does the intensity of the startling phase, which appears to be most severe when it occurs during adolescence. The confusion seems to be less when voices are heard from an early age, or did not make an appearance until later in adulthood. (In a survey 6% heard voices before the age of 6; 10% between 10 and 20; 74% after 20).

Voices are often triggered by traumatic or emotional experiences such as accidents, divorce or bereavement, illnesses, psychotherapy sessions, or a time of great suffering.

The impact of the voices fall into two main types:

1. Some people perceive the voices as helpful and they evoke a feeling of recognition. These people feel the purpose of the voices is strengthening them and raising their self-esteem. The voices are experienced as positive and as an understandable aspect of their internal selves.
2. Others experience the voices as aggressive and negative from the very beginning. For these people the voices are hostile and are not accepted as part of themselves. They suffer from negative voices that can cause chaos in their minds, demanding so much attention that communication with the outside world is extremely difficult.



Phase of Organisation

“I’m trying to understand my voices.”

Voice hearers often become confused by their voices and want to escape from them. For some, this urge lasts only a short time (weeks or months), for others, it can be many years. However, to come to terms with the voices on any level or to organise them successfully, requires some form of acceptance to take place. Denying the voices does not work. In this phase people seek to find meaning and to arrive at some understanding of their experience. Once a person's initial anxiety and confusion is reduced, it is possible for them to organise the voices and their relationship to them.

Strategies include:

- Ignoring the voices (through distraction)
- Listening to them selectively
- Entering into willing dialogue with them
- Making specific appointments with them

Attempts at distraction and ignoring rarely work, although this is a strategy many voice hearers attempt, it seems the effort involved often leads to a severe restriction of life style. Unsurprisingly, initial feelings of panic and powerlessness are replaced with a period of anger at the voices. This anger does not appear to be part of a useful coping strategy. The most useful strategy described by voice hearers is to select the positive voices and listen and talk only to them, and to try to understand them.

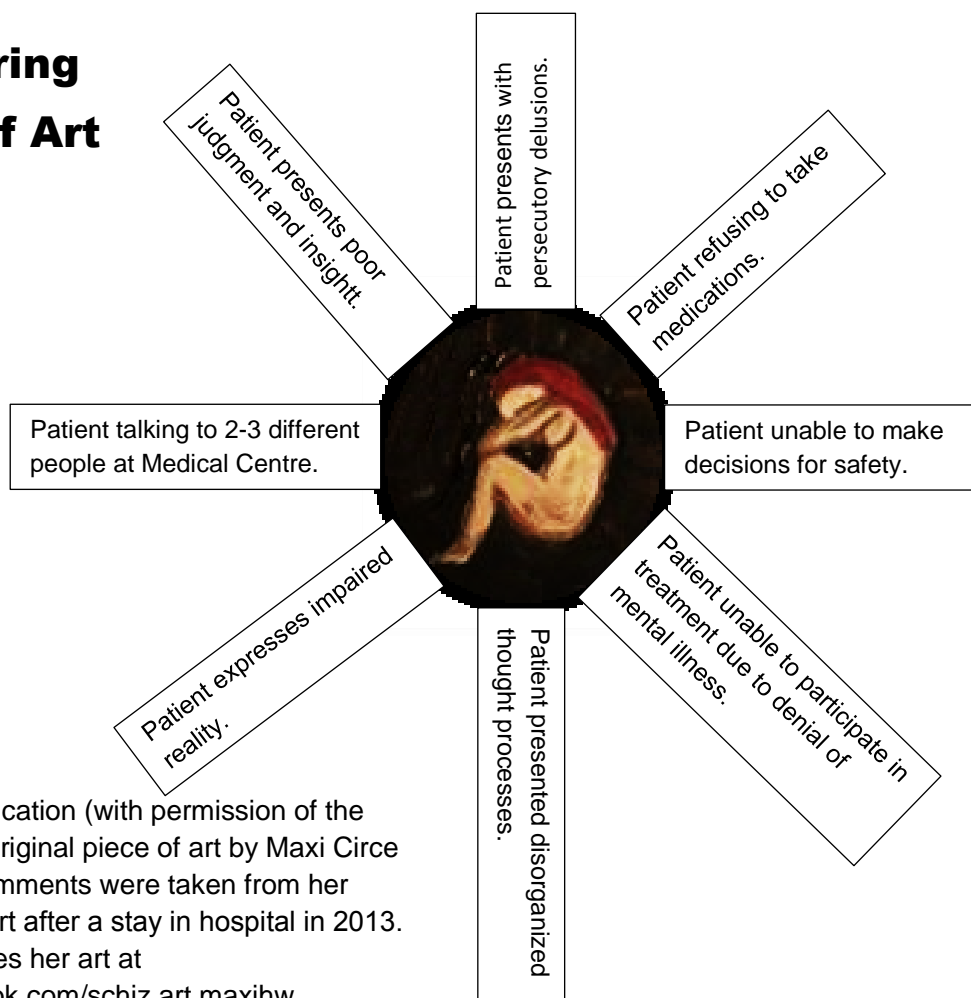
- An important element in coping successfully with voices is to accept them;
- Another strategy is to set limits and structure the contact with the voices, sometimes accompanied by rituals or repeated actions;
- Attending to the possible significance of the voices in terms of a person's current and past experiences.
- Attending to the meaning of the voices in a person's everyday life; and
- Thinking about the particular circumstances under which the voices are heard.

Phase of Stabilisation

“I hear voices and I cope with it.”

People can and do learn to cope with their voices and find a kind of equilibrium. In this state of balance, people consider the voices as part of themselves and their lives, and capable of a positive influence. During this phase, the individual is able to choose between following the advice of the voices or their own ideas, and can say "I hear voices and I'm happy about it".

A Sobering Piece of Art



This is a replication (with permission of the artist) of an original piece of art by Maxi Circe HW. The comments were taken from her doctor's report after a stay in hospital in 2013. Maxi publishes her art at www.facebook.com/schiz.art.maxihw

Hearing Voices Network Aotearoa NZ would like to thank INTERVOICE (www.intervoiceonline.org) and Keepwell Ltd for the information they provided that enabled us to collate this information.