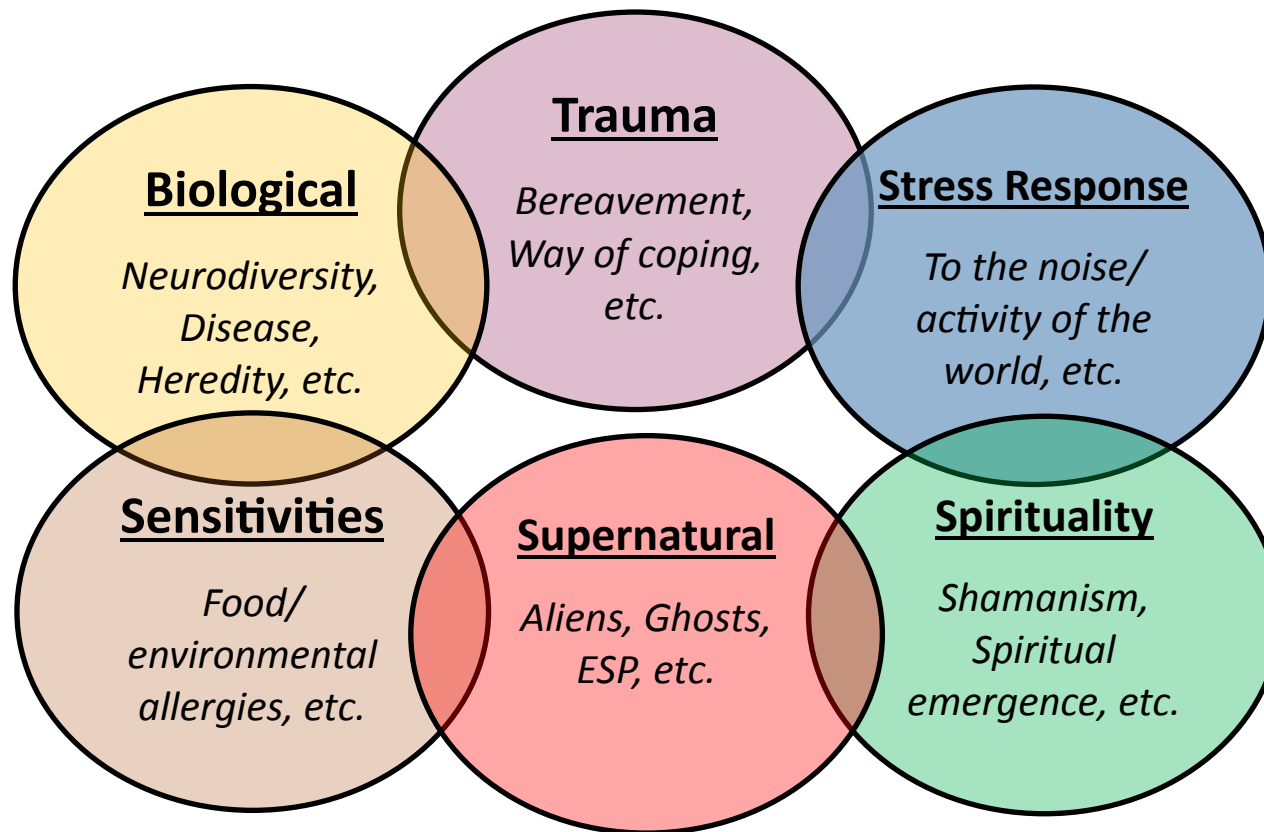


Why do people hear voices?

Pretty much
always the
right response

I don't know why any *one* person hears voices, but here are just a handful of reasons why some people believe that they do...



And how is that belief impacting their life?

Why do people hear voices?

Anyone is capable of hearing voices given the right set of circumstances (fever, isolation, lack of sleep, etc.). But the 'why' often isn't so clear, and the Hearing Voices approach suggests that the right answer to this question is always going to be 'I don't know.' This is because:

- There is no real way (no definitive test, etc.) of knowing the root cause for any one person
- Although there is typically a most commonly believed/accepted reason, what that reason is can shift over time or between cultures. This goes further to suggest that reasons are based more on belief systems than on any one 'right' answer.
- Input from hundreds of thousands of voice hearers across the world suggests the importance of supporting people to make meaning of their own experience far over and beyond having an external meaning pushed on them.

Just a handful of perspectives that people may use when making meaning of voices include:

Biological: The most commonly accepted explanation for voice hearing in most Westernized cultures is medical or biologic in nature. However, even a biological perspective does not necessarily mean 'disease' (though that is the most common interpretation). Biological explanations can also include heredity that isn't disease-based (i.e., saying that there is a hereditary link between family members who hear voices is not the same as saying there is a hereditary link of illness, as voice hearing doesn't need to be regarded as sickness or 'bad'). It can also include physical injury, or 'neurodiversity' which simply speaks to brains that are differently wired without the assumption that one is inherently better than the other. (Perhaps there could even be an evolutionary quality to voice hearing where it has been deemed a positive or negative trait based on environment.) Unfortunately, the only biological perspective that is widely discussed and promoted is one based in a disease model, and it's important to remember that—in spite of being the most popular explanation—no biological link has been objectively or scientifically proven (i.e., no definitive genetic link or disease process has been identified).

Sensitivities: In some instances, this may be a nuance of a 'biological' perspective in that it's possible that some people's biological make-up may lead them to be more sensitive to certain elements. Others may develop these sensitivities based on environment. Regardless, for some, sensitivities to things like lack of sleep, food or chemicals (etc.) in the environment, or to drugs (both prescribed and otherwise) may lead to the experience of voice hearing.

Trauma: Trauma is generally defined by the individual (no one else can really say what trauma is or is not for someone else) and can be understood to be anything that leads that person to believe that the world is an unsafe place that is unable to meet their most basic needs (at least without substantial adaptation on their part). It may be the result of one big event or a series of smaller events or conditions (like racism or poverty) that have cumulative impact. One of the most common alternative explanations to a biological perspective is one based in trauma. In fact, research based on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study suggests that people with an ACE score of 7 or higher have a 700% greater

chance of hearing voices. Many who experience voice hearing as a result of trauma also interpret the voice hearing experience as a way of coping or as an adaptation that helps them survive in the world in some way. For example, some may come to learn that even a scary voice is simply meant as a warning about an environment that may be dangerous for them (or at least is believed to be dangerous based on past trauma experiences).

Stress Response: Closely related to a trauma perspective is a ‘stress response’ perspective. Similarly, a ‘stress response’ may come about when someone finds the world or an event overwhelming, even if they wouldn’t define it as ‘trauma’ per se. For example, some people find living in the chaotic environment of a big city (with all its noise, movement, and rush) to be overwhelming at a sensory level. If they’re not able to move and live in an environment that allows them to feel more at ease, they may develop voices (or any other number of stress responses) as a result. Again, for some, they may see this as a way of coping (at least initially), rather than necessarily as ‘maladaptive’.

Spirituality: The founders of the Hearing Voices movement developed some of their earliest understanding of this concept when comparing religious and medical interpretations of voice hearing. Specifically, Patsy Hage (a voice hearer and founder of the HV perspective) asked Marius Romme (her doctor and one of two co-founders) why his religion’s acceptance that some may hear the voice of their god was any more valid than the voices she herself heard.. This led Marius to re-consider his assumptions about Patsy’s experience (and the experience of voice hearers in general). In fact, many religions and spiritual frameworks include histories of people hearing voices of ancestors, deities, and so on. Within that context, many see this experience as a gift, or process of emergence or the finding of one’s true self that can be a meaningful process if someone is supported to integrate that experience into this world in a way that allows them to continue to walk through it. There is also a perspective called ‘spiritual emergency’ that is gaining traction in the world, and speaks to the challenges sometimes faced when one is going through that process.

Supernatural: This perspective is sometimes closely related to a spiritual perspective, as (for some) supernatural experiences may be connected to their spiritual beliefs. Regardless, this perspective may include when someone hears the voice of deceased relatives or friends, or any number of other experiences including, for example, when someone believes their voices are the result of an alien transmission or the voice of some other supernatural being. This perspective is the one most likely to be disregarded as a ‘symptom’ of illness rather than a legitimate way to understand the voice hearing experience. However, for many people, this is a powerful way of making meaning that has positive impact on their life. For those of us who have difficulty accepting frameworks that seem to ‘weird’ or difficult to understand based on our own beliefs, it may be most important to keep reminding ourselves that it is, in fact, the impact someone’s beliefs has on their lives that is most important.

And how is that belief impacting that person’s life? Coming to an understanding (whether based on conventional wisdom or something that seems very foreign from it) can be an important and healing process, and will often require supporters to let go of their own pre-conceived notions. Questions that may be useful in this process include: Is the person invested in this way of thinking? Did they come to this conclusion or has it been pushed on them? Does this belief have any negative consequences, and if so, what does that look like? What about positive impacts? Does the person want to explore other ways of making meaning of their voices or other unusual experiences? **It’s also important to note that how someone explains their voices is very different than what they do or don’t wish to do about them.**