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Limbrick Centre, Limbrick Road, Sheffield, S6 2PE,

Tel: 07590837359

Email: enquiries@nationalparanoianetwork.org

Website: www.nationalparanoianetwork.org

support@nationalparanoianetwork.org

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Hearing Voices, Sharing Stories

By Charlotte Conway.

Charlotte's research interests are the uses of personal narratives and recovery stories within the Hearing Voices Movement.

As he enters the ward, the man nervously surveys his surroundings. I approach him, smile, introduce myself and offer my hand. He goes to shake it but changes his mind. He looks back as the door to the outside world clicks shut and locks behind him.

I offer him a seat in one of the small interview rooms. He sits down, shuffles around in his chair for a moment then stands up again. His eyes dart around the room. He sits down again, wringing his hands. He looks over his shoulder, shakes his head and mutters to himself. I ask him if he's hearing voices. He tells me that he is and asks if he's been followed...

There are very few clues about a person's story when they are first admitted to hospital. Information is often third hand, discussing the person in terms of symptoms and risk. I have no sense of who they are as a person, what motivates them, what they have achieved and what hardships they have endured. Away from their usual surroundings, from the context which reflects what is unique about them, they are stripped of their identity. I see a person who is often scared, disorientated, and confused. But this is merely a snapshot of that person in time.

Overwhelmed by their experiences, their story is often fragmented and difficult to piece together. They may have difficulty communicating it, struggling to make themselves heard over the voices that are speaking to them.

They may have been sectioned and brought to hospital against their will

Often with the assistance of the police. Angry and mistrustful, their story becomes something which is guarded and kept hidden from nurses and doctors. During their lives, so often characterised by perseverance and endurance, many methods of coping are developed, with the hardships they have experienced held closely. Many have been carrying secrets around with them for years. When they have tried to tell their story, they may not have been listened to or believed.

Soon after arriving on the ward, people are clerked in by a doctor. Here, they begin to be taught how to view their experiences as symptoms and are given the medical language they need to do this. They are asked about their mood, sleep, diet and if they have any thoughts of suicide. They are asked if they are hearing voices, feeling paranoid or if they believe they have any special powers. They are asked what has happened in the weeks leading up to the admission, but not what has happened generally in their lives.

“Overwhelmed by their experiences, their story is often fragmented and difficult to piece together.”

Throughout their admission, people’s stories are often suppressed.

The environment is just not conducive to hearing them. At mealtimes, nurses are discouraged from sitting down and eating with patients. Instead, a member of staff sits in the corner, observing people and ticking them off as they enter the room and collect their food. And a perfect opportunity for the sharing of stories is lost.

Dedicated and hardworking nurses struggle to cope with the demand on beds, increasing paperwork and inadequate staffing levels. Resources are being stretched to breaking point and exhausted nurses must do their best in chaotic and stressful circumstances. In an environment where every second of time is accounted for, spending meaningful time with someone, and hearing their story is a luxury that cannot always be afforded. Faced with a ward full of distressed

and often suicidal patients, it's heart-breaking not to be able to give people the time they deserve.

Often the go-to solution for busy nursing staff who want to help relieve someone's suffering, is to give them extra medication. In the short term it works, but most nurses are all too aware that in reality, you're offering a solution which is temporary and often encourages dependence...

Morning medication. A queue forms outside the clinic room door. The plastic tots are lined up and carefully filled with water. A bowl is put out to collect the empties, the key unlocks the drug trolley, and the door is opened. A woman slowly enters the room. She is carrying a cold cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The ward feels warm, but she is wearing a thick woollen jumper and a heavy sheepskin coat. The weathered skin on her face looks clammy and her eyes are puffy. Emptying each of her tablets into a tot, I hand them to her and ask her how she slept. She tells me she slept better last night, and the voices weren't as bad. I smile at her and she tells me I look tired. She's right. I didn't sleep well last night. After working a late shift, I got home and set my alarm for 5.30am. I had a restless night full of strange dreams. I decide to tell her one. Having previously told her about my forthcoming wedding, I describe my dream in which I was standing in

front of my friends and family reciting my vows. As I look down, to my horror, I realise that I'm completely naked. This makes her laugh. She takes my hand and tells me I'll be okay. I ask her if she was nervous before she got married. She tells me about the morning of her wedding, describes struggling into her 1970s satin dress. And in this way, I start to finally get a glimpse of who this lady once was



Living with the magnetism of madness

I am on intimate terms with my madness. Together we have been seducers and lovers, escapees and bad asses, competitors, companions, and mortal enemies. These days we are more like constructive collaborators.

Well, that's a bit of a fib. It's like that most of the time, but some days my madness and I still have a bit of a barney. The important thing is that I am the one who retains control. Mostly. It wasn't always like this. For most of my life my madness was an unknown. An invasive other self and alien other world. And sometimes, awful as it was, madness also had a kind of magnetism. Madness can bring a strange comfort. For me it often came with a seductive quality that lured me to relax and fall into the familiar comfort of its waiting arms. Despite all of the chaotic cognitive calisthenics of madness, the existential emptiness and emotional agonies, madness came with something achingly beautiful, too. A release, a letting go, a freedom of being that felt unequalled in its authenticity. Madness requires no responsibility, no accommodations, no requirements of any kind besides surrender. I often felt that being in a state of madness was the ultimate honesty, and so it had a raw and wild beauty that made it hard to escape. Of course, most of the time it just sucked completely, but somehow, I often seemed to forget that. Even now, some days the lure of madness

peeks out at me; it whispers for me to let go and submit. Sometimes my voice speaks to me in the middle of meetings. Sometimes it screams. Some days the urge to self-harm itches like an ankle full of flea bites, telling me that just one scratch will bring relief. Some days my head is so busy it feels like there are no neurons left with which to think. Some mornings I wake up after long familiar nightmares of sheer terror, sweating and shaking and feeling like torment is my new skin. Other days I feel the possibility of letting go of reality is so close that the seams of my mind and body are held with nothing more than a sliver of floss. My theme song on those days is Radiohead's *Climbing up the walls*. But as well as I know this tune, I have many others in my repertoire now. *Closer to Fine* by the Indigo Girls. *Steer* by Missy Higgins. *One Voice* by the Wailin' Jenny's. I sing to these tunes when I can. I no longer suppress or ignore or fight these whispers and soul aches. I have learnt that this tempting strange darkness will probably always be a part of my life and so I need to hold it and love it. I have tried the alternatives, and they don't work. I have learnt that my madness holds wisdom, but it is a childlike kind of wisdom with a limited palette and a large brush. It alerts me to emotions and problems that I need to attend to, it was shaped by a terrible past that I can understand but never change, and while the truth of my madness is important to hear, I now know that its problem-solving skills are just not that great. It still makes the same kind of awful suggestions that it always did. I have not really been able to change my

madness all that much – but I have been able to change how I understand it, how I respond to it, and how I accommodate it. So, I listen to my madness, I hear the messages that sit behind the strangeness of it, I thank it and love it, I weigh it up carefully ... and then I make my own decisions. Madness may still feel like a seductive lover, calling to me to join it in a tumultuous affair. But real life is more like a marriage than an affair. It's difficult and requires listening and work and compromise but it's worth the commitment. Well, most days anyway



Cultural Voices

**There are 7 things that contribute to a person's
identity**

**The 7 things are: Kinship / family Taboos & beliefs,
Spirituality and law, Community Obligations,
Communication, History
Health - spiritual, physical, or mental
(The Aboriginal culture)**

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many cultures do not discount the experience of voice hearing, visions, etc., but deal with them from within their own basket of beliefs. These can provide important insights when learning how to deal with one's own experiences.

In other cultures, voice hearers are not seen as unwell, but special members of the community. Examples shown:

- Native Americans use sweat lodges to induce visions.
- Blackfoot shaman, and other shamans, often perform "power dances, drumming's", or dress as their power animals, journeying to the other worlds to find their answers.

- Christians have their own rituals and ceremonies, histories of prophets and visions within the bible that were rich in symbols, and fights with otherworldly forces.
- In India, sadhus are treated with great respect, and use meditation and yogic exercises to have better control of their voices and visions.

People throughout history have always heard voices and had visions. There are examples in all religions and cultures in all countries. Often sharing information of these beliefs can help to normalise experiences.

Examples:

- False (ka) doors in Ancient Egypt for the spirit to leave and enter the tomb through
- Maori God sticks, used for the various gods to “inhabit” during important rituals.



Showing the Effectiveness of the Maastricht Interview for Hearing Voices with the Elderly

After attending the Maastricht Interview training facilitated by Peter Bullimore in Orange NSW Australia I started working with people in the community as well as the hospital setting, and I am currently working with two elderly women who are very distressed by voices. One of the women is 91yrs old and, lives alone, is essentially independent and she is a 'knockout'....she is highly intelligent, a very saucy personality, articulate and has a rather regal presence about her ...however her deep sense of paranoia was really impacting on her life. Working with her has me up on my toes! Since we completed the Maastricht interview, and she gained more understanding of her voices her paranoia is less intense. I believe the incidence of older people hearing voices is very much underestimated. It is a regular feature of the distress people are experiencing when they are admitted to the unit where I work. I am new to the community role with the aged care assessment team so it will be interesting to see how many people I come into contact with who are distressed by voices and how I am able to work with them effectively

Sally Taylor NSW Australia

Nine Traps of Childhood Emotional Neglect

1. **It makes your tendency to put others first even more exaggerated.** When your parents failed to notice your feelings and emotional needs in your childhood, they give you the message that your feelings and needs are unimportant. This plays out powerfully during holidays when you are prone to be too worried about making other people happy, and not paying enough attention to yourself.
2. **It can make you feel even more alone.** With your feelings walled off, it is hard to connect with other people on a deep and meaningful emotional level. This can make you identify even more acutely what is missing in your own.
3. **You are vulnerable to missing out on what matters the most.** Lacking full access to your own emotions has another effect. It can result in you going all the way through the days focusing on pleasing others instead of looking after yourself. This is also something that is extremely hard to realize in yourself because it's difficult to know what you are missing.
4. **You are prone to the Holiday Trap: Looking forward to your family holiday and then feeling disappointed and let down.** Emotionally neglectful families often can appear perfectly normal from the outside. So, you are vulnerable to expecting to feel happy and connected with

your people, only to feel the lack of true emotional connection when you see them. This can lead to a roller-coaster experience: happy, excited expectations followed by a disappointing let down.

5. **Being around your family continues your CEN.** If your parents emotionally neglected you in your childhood, chances are high that they are still doing so. You will feel it when you see them This is one of the main causes of the disappointment described above.
6. **Once you are aware of CEN it makes you see your parents and siblings differently.** Seeing Emotional Neglect in your family changes how you view your birth family in some powerful ways. You begin to see that what seemed benign before is actually hurtful and harmful to you. This may make you feel angry or frustrated with them.
7. **The pressure to be joyous makes you feel lacking.** CEN makes it hard to feel as intensely as others do, and it also makes you prone to feeling empty at times. For many with CEN, the pressure to feel joy makes it even more obvious that something is missing in your life. You may experience the emptiness even more.
8. **Your tendency toward self-anger and self-blame gets triggered.** You may feel angry at yourself for overeating, not exercising enough, or for saying something you regret. There are

many opportunities to do any or all of these things during the holidays.

9. **You are more likely to find yourself running on empty.** Riding the roller-coaster of disappointment, surrounded by family but feeling alone, over-focused on others at the expense of yourself, and out of touch with the energy of your feelings, you are likely to power through the holidays by sheer force of will, all the while growing ever more drained day by day.

What to Do

Although the CEN ship has already sailed through your childhood, it is never too late to turn that ship around. But to do so, you must be proactive. Now that you see what has been dragging down your holidays for years, you are in a good position to start making things different for yourself.

In the short term, now before the holidays, start treating yourself more as if you matter. Set aside time every single day to do something that nurtures you. Pay attention to the feelings you are having each day and accept what you feel without judgment. Make sure you get enough rest, healthy food, and fresh air, and spend time with someone you enjoy.

And most importantly, start healing the roots of what is wrong: your Childhood Emotional Neglect.

Here are **Ten Mantras** to choose from:

1. **I did not cause this problem, and I cannot fix it.** Almost never did one member of a family cause the problem. And almost NEVER can one member of a family fix the problem. The best you can do is tolerate it, and this mantra will help you do so.
2. **It is not my fault.** In most families, the people who are the least guilty feel the most guilt. Do not succumb to it. Fight it with this mantra.
3. **Just smile and get through it.** This mantra works for families that have low tolerance for anything negative and require everyone to seem happy (an example of Emotional Neglect).
4. **This is not a competition.** Sibling rivalry? This mantra can help you stay out of it.
5. **There's not enough love to go around in this family.** This is helpful for a family in which one or both parents are not capable of the type of love that the children need. It will make you less vulnerable to the feeling that you are unlovable.
6. **I am a loveable person.** This mantra approaches the "not enough love" problem from a different angle. You are reassuring yourself to fight off that painful feeling.
7. **My parents cannot give me what they never got.** This is helpful for the emotionally neglectful family. If your parents were not emotionally validated by their parents, they will not be able

to respond emotionally to you. This mantra will remind you that it is no one's fault. It just is.

8. **Today, I am giving my family the gift of tolerance.** This mantra helps you continually reframe the discomfort you are putting up with as a generous gift (which it is!)
9. **It is not just me. Everyone is hurting in this family.** If you feel pained by your family issues, then chances are, so does everyone else. Worst behaviour is actually an expression of pain. Use this mantra to remind yourself that you are not alone in this.
10. **Who cares what _____ thinks?** If you have a mean or attacking family member: mother, father, sib, aunt, uncle or grandparent, this mantra will make you less vulnerable to their jabs.

Changing the way, we respond to emotions

Changing how we respond to emotions takes time – but it is possible. I know because I've done it myself, and seen many others do the same.

No, it is not easy. It involves learning a new self-awareness, new habits and then practicing them over and over. Some helpful first steps in changing the way we respond to difficult emotions include:

1. Don't suppress your emotions – this is a key contributor to mental health issues. The more we push emotions down, the more they 'pop out' in new & distressing ways.
2. Notice what emotions you are feeling and when you feel them. Keeping a journal can help to get a new perspective.
3. Listen to the messages behind your emotions why are you feeling this? There are always reasons (but some may be difficult to acknowledge).
4. Address the issues behind your emotions. Denial does not work. Feeling sorry for

ourselves makes it worse. But getting into 'problem solving mode' can really help.

5. Practice ways of responding to your emotions that really try to resolve the message behind the emotion, and the way that it impacts your mind and body.
6. Remember that just because other people may respond in unhelpful ways – and even if you have done the same in the past – does not mean you can't change.
7. Get support, this can be from good friends or family, from a support worker, a peer, a support group, counsellor, or therapist. Getting help can make all the difference but be aware that it can take a while to find the right person for you.
8. Remember the wise words of Sir Winston Churchill, who also struggled with difficult emotions.... "Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, give up. Never give up. Never give up. Never give up."

Maastricht Interview Training for Hearing Voices & Problematic Thought Beliefs & Paranoia Is available online from the National Paranoia Network.

Other training available online Working through Paranoia, Making Sense of Hearing Voices & Working with Childhood Trauma

It can be delivered across the world for more information and costings Email enquiries@nationalparanoianetwork.org

Online Hearing Voices & Paranoia Support Groups Join our online Hearing Voices & Paranoia Support Group Meetings on ZOOM

Thursday 3pm -4.30pm with Paul Meeting ID 88460268952 Password 375878

Sundays: HVN USA on ZOOM 6:30p - 8:00p USA Time with Cindee 11.30pm – 1.00 am UK Time Meeting ID 827 5463 8654 No Password Needed

Saturdays Texas USA HVN Meeting on ZOOM 10am-11.30 USA Time with Paul 4pm-5.30pm UK Time Meeting ID 83079149464 No Password Needed

Monday Sheffield Hearing Voices & Paranoia Support Group with Emma & Lyn On ZOOM 11am- 12pm UK Time Meeting ID: 558 685 8263 Password 6DyVca