

Listening to Voices: A Meaning-Focused Framework for Supporting People with Auditory Verbal Hallucinations

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Abstract : People with auditory verbal hallucinations (AVH) who seek support from mental health services commonly report feeling unheard and invalidated in their interactions with social workers and psychiatric professionals. Current mental health training and clinical approaches have proven to be inadequate in addressing the complex nature of voice hearing. Childhood trauma is a key factor in the development of AVH and can render people more vulnerable to hearing both supportive and/or disturbing voices. Lived experiences of racism, poverty, and immigration are also associated with development of what is broadly classified as psychosis. Despite evidence affirming the influence of environmental factors on voice hearing, the Western biomedical system typically conceptualizes this experience as a symptom of genetically-based mental illnesses which requires diagnosis and treatment. Overemphasis on psychiatric medications, referrals, and directive approaches to people's problems has shifted clinical interventions away from assessing and addressing problems directly related to AVH. The Maastricht approach offers voice hearers and mental health workers an alternative and respectful starting point for understanding and coping with voices. The approach was developed by voice hearers in partnership with mental health professionals and entails an innovative method to assess and create meaning from voice hearing and related life stressors. The objectives of the approach are to help people who hear voices: (1) understand the problems and/or people the voices may represent in their history, and (2) cope with distress and find solutions to related problems. The Maastricht approach has also been found to help voice hearers integrate emotional conflicts, reduce avoidance or fear associated with AVH, improve therapeutic relationships, and increase a sense of control over internal experiences. The proposed oral presentation will be guided by a recovery-oriented theoretical framework which suggests healing from psychological wounds occurs through social connections and community support systems. The presentation will start with a brainstorming exercise to identify participants pre-existing knowledge of the subject matter. This will lead into a literature review on the relations between trauma, intersectionality, and AVH. An overview of the Maastricht approach and review of research related to its therapeutic risks and benefits will follow. Participants will learn trauma-informed coping skills and questions which can help voice hearers make meaning from their experiences. The presentation will conclude with a review of resources and learning opportunities where participants can expand their knowledge of the Hearing Voices Movement and Maastricht approach.

Keywords : Maastricht interview, recovery, therapeutic assessment, voice hearing

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