

Lorna Ritchie interviews
Ivan Barry,
advocate for
mental health

Listening to voices, only I can hear ...

If World Health Organisation statistics are accurate, one in seven people are dealing with mental health issues at any given time. That's one billion people. Research also indicates that 4% of people hear voices, that they do not recognise as their own, these voices are external, arrive uninvited and can be distressing. Medical professionals identify them as a symptom of a neurological condition that they label "schizophrenia". Hearing a voice is very different to our inner intuitive commentary of life, our internal guide or moral authority, which in NVC training is referred to as inner jackal or inner giraffe.

What is it like to suddenly hear a voice that you do not recognise as your own?

It can be very disconcerting to suddenly hear a voice speak to you or about you. It may appear and vanish in response to stresses, trauma and crisis, sometimes for prolonged experiences and some of these voices are critical and say negative or threatening things. People feel alarmed, surprised, distracted, think they are going mad. Psychiatrists do not show interest in the content of what people hear when they report voice-hearing experiences. The medical response is often only medication.

How has the view of voice hearing changed?

Medication only works for around one-third of patients. Since the pioneer work of psychiatrist Professor Marius Romme at Maastricht University, we know that some people experience their voices as helpful, performing beneficial roles in their lives. This group of people do not seek help from mental health professionals, can cope quite well, even with negative voices.

The voice hearing experiences sometimes convey real meaning that can be understood if we know how to pay careful attention.

Romme learned that many voice hearers were traumatised, their voices often spoke to these events. His research and results influenced public awareness, change in medical approaches and methods of recovery related responses to negative voice hearing experiences rather than

health professional over-reliance on powerful psychiatric medication. Voice-hearing individuals need and wish to be heard. There is now a specific framework for doing this known as the Maastricht interview.

My work for 20 years providing mental health support and patient advocacy in hospitals, prisons and community settings was inspired by Romme's approach. I asked questions, started peer support groups, researched famous historical figures who shaped our world, gave awareness raising talks and attended mental health conferences. (In Iceland I was told they have changed the medical approach completely since my visit there in 2014.)

Who has this experience?

Voice hearing is quite a common human experience. If you ask any group of people almost 70 % have at some point heard their name called without anyone being near. Ca. 3-10 % regularly hear voice that others don't. They are not all ill and in need of professional help. It may not distress them. It is a natural phenomenon of the human experience. Many people have had this experience of hearing voices throughout history and have left a legacy of social change, a gift of art or science, made profound contributions to the world today. For example: Carl Jung, Paul McCartney, Zinedine Zidane, Brian Wilson,



Gandhi, Moses, Hildegard von Bingen, Robert Schumann, Virginia Woolf and Sir Anthony Hopkins. Just a few I found in my research.

Cultural differences

Interestingly, there are differences in voice hearing experiences dependent upon the culture that they take place in. Of course, historically too, there have been varying interpretations and explanations relating to hearing voices. In a comparative study with people carrying a „schizophrenia“ label at Stanford University (Tanya Luhrmann) there were surprising variations in the content and beliefs relating to voice hearing. Voice hearers in India and Africa reported that their voices often said supportive things, reminding them of errands and self-care. These voices were often those of family members, many in distant places. Those interviewed in the USA were prone to violent and commanding voices. They felt disempowered, helpless and were entirely reliant on medication.

This invites questions around the kind of cultures we create. * 1)

How did you start working with this topic?

In the 1990s I was intrigued by the experiences my clients had to deal with and started a voice hearer's support group to co-create a safe space for folk to talk and be heard. There were simple rules: listening, respect, no judgements. Participants shared their lived experiences, were able to identify an experience that had triggered their voice hearing and, discussed their strategies

for coping. They began to feel empowered despite so much misunderstanding, false perceptions and stigma in the public consciousness. Medical staff are usually under time pressure and talking about voices usually resulted in increased psychiatric medication, but not here. I witnessed a lot of empathic connection. There are now ca. 450 peer support groups worldwide.

What are helpful methods for voice-hearers?

In the groups we were able to try out strategies that had helped others, basically safe listening skills were the important framework.

Helpful strategies include:

- voice journals and diaries: identify potential triggers and benefits.
- external mapping (external representation of inner experiences).
- Naming characteristics of each voice, gender, name, size, age, appearance.
- Self-exploring: When did this voice begin? Where have you heard these comments before in your life? Is it about unresolved trauma/ healing that is needed? How do you FEEL about the voice?
- timesharing: creating voice-free spaces to study, relax, work, do a hobby, read and write.
- Ignoring the voices. This works for a few people, often only briefly.

➤ Focussed listening. If a person has several voices, one more positive, then engage more with this voice.

➤ Setting geographical boundaries: where and when to listen or ignore.

➤ Boundary setting: Ordering or „zapping“ voices away using imaginary laser gun i.e. only listening at specific times

➤ Talking with voices: Through a mediating person. Why are you here? What is your purpose? What would it take for you to go away?

➤ Finally, an easy to ask but hard to answer question: Do you want to keep these voices or have them go away?

Can you tell of some examples of changing the road to recovery?

Case example one

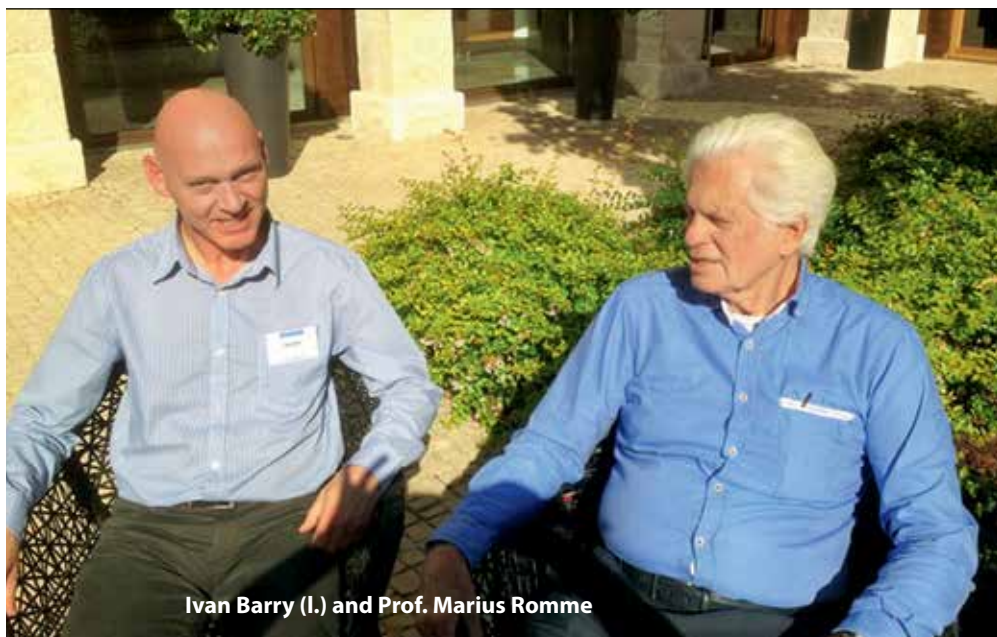
Using a diary Harry saw his voices were more agitated at four pm on Wednesdays and Fridays. He realised that was when he went shopping with his social worker. The store is big, fifty tills! „It´s horrible, I am very sensitive to sound.“ We found a solution. One quick phone call to the social worker and he now shops with her at seven p.m. The store is quieter, only a few tills are open. His voices became much quieter, he was no longer stressed about shopping.

Not all voices are easy to interpret and analyse.

Case example two

David from Scotland was hearing „demons“ most of his waking hours. He began to think he was possessed, trying to drown out the noise by smoking strong marijuana and drinking whisky. He slept in the day and watched TV all night, the radio playing as well. He hated his life and would give anything to make it all stop. Unable to express the content of voice hearing, he described it as „babble“, I had him record what he was hearing by speaking into his phone. On listening, it made no sense to me at all. I played it to a friend at Edinburgh University and she passed it on to the „Lost Languages“ experts there.

A week later, we met for coffee. The voices that David was hearing were indeed a „lost“ aramäic language, last spoken in the 13th and 14th centuries. Nobody knows why he was hearing this. David became motivated to use the coping booklets and learn self-management skills. One year later David travelled by train with me to >



Ivan Barry (l.) and Prof. Marius Romme

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the International Congress on Voice Hearing, hosted in Cardiff, Wales, UK, where he gave an inspiring talk about his personal journey. Gaining in confidence, David has now become an „ambassador“ for recovery.

Since 2015 I have had the privilege and benefit of learning NVC and utilise the wisdom and skills for my work, especially in my online support sessions and at our UK-based „Wilderness Recovery Camps.“

Wilderness recovery camps

For the past three years, we hosted a gathering in a beautiful countryside setting in the United Kingdom. 70 participants, wishing to work and make progress on their mental health recovery journeys, travelled from across Europe to attend ca. 20 workshops in five days as a community in a forest setting, surrounded by nature and tranquility.

In many cases the trainers have had lived experience of mental health distress, creating a balance between presenter and participant that cannot exist in hospital settings and institutions due to the hierarchies of power that clearly exist in such environments.

For example, one doctor who has prolonged experiences of severe depression and suicidal thinking, ran a popular workshop on that subject. A psychologist, who hears voices but manages well, ran a session on safely talking with voices.

The interesting speakers and contributors have included a psychiatrist from a Native American “First People” background, using rituals and storytelling strategies as an essential part of their powerful healing ministry. There are morning and evening community meetings, nice healthy locally made food, live music and poetry performances to finish off the camp each evening. There are also tears of gratitude at the end. I see the evidence of profound personal growth, there in front of me, people with more confidence, more self-belief, more hope.

Integrating NVC practice

In 2017 I gave an introduction to the principles and steps of NVC, which inspired the request for more information.

I placed laminated needs cards through the forest and along the pathways and invited people to take a 15-minute stroll, noting the needs that spoke to them currently and what they would like to be met at the camp. They found it very helpful to connect to and think about their needs rather than be stuck in thoughts and beliefs. There were role plays, exercises and laughter. Later in the evening after supper I walked by the late night kitchen and overheard two female participants discussing clear and precise requests around kitchen work.

Sam: „If you cook in here and leave pots and pans for other people to wash, they are going to get annoyed. And if they find out it’s you, well, you won’t be very popular.“

Susi: „Well, I have a need to eat and that means cooking, even it’s late. At home I’m a night owl and sleep in the day. It has become a long time habit. What do you suggest I do? Do you have a suggestion?“

Sam: „Yes I do. Just contribute more. We all need to muck in here if we want to build a community. I’m fed up coming in in the mornings and looking at a sink of unwashed plates and cutlery in cold greasy water. It’s frustrating and it doesn’t meet my own need for cleanliness and efficiency if I have to dig around in dirty cold water, empty and clean the sink and then wash things up in order to be able to use them. Especially if I am still half asleep“

Susi: „Huh, ok. So, do you have a clear and precise request for me?“

Laughter.

Sam: „I do. Can you please wash up the things that you use and put them back where they belong so that others can find them easily in the morning?“

Susi: „Yes, I can!“

I popped my head around the door. „I’m very impressed.“ They broke out into laughter.

Next morning, the kitchen sink was sparkling clean and tidy.



NVC enabling us to transform labels

In 2018 in Wales, I facilitated a workshop session on labels, inspired by Frank Gaschler, finding potential hidden treasures in negative labels and beliefs. It facilitated self-empathy, looking beyond the label using simple written exercises, transformation, sharing and discussion.

Mary, who has always been told she is too „slow“, came to the realisation that she is a methodical, cautious and careful individual who does not like taking risks. Seeing this as a skill necessary in certain tasks left her smiling.

Peter said „lazy“ and recounted a few stories. He found enjoyment in these suggestions for the „hidden treasure“:

„Maybe you are a curious person who always likes to move to the next interesting topic“

„Maybe you don’t like being stuck for too long or restricted and told what you must do.“

„Maybe you really value your ability to make your own choices, not what others tell you you must do.

„You are a free spirit and want to find your own way through life and pursue your own interests?“

Another smile. „I never looked at it like that before but. I think that’s right.“

For me as facilitator, the most moving moment was when Alex spoke. He had neck tattoos and a



Coaching a voice-hearer

NVC has been very useful when I provide online distance support to people struggling to cope with negative and persistent voices. Learning to be able to give empathy to critical voices means that individuals can develop a different and more empowering relationship with their voices. I feel strongly that it is very important when using nvc that you have knowledge of the phenomenon of voice hearers. If you ask „what does your inner giraffe/jackal say?“ you may be suggesting you know of the difference and unwittingly find yourself or your listener in

tricky situations.

case example three

Petra emailed me from Slovenia. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia two years ago after she began to hear voices and had become isolated socially, sleeping all day and awake all night, an effect she felt was also caused by her powerful psychiatric medication.

She had been a vibrant, aspirational college student, enjoyed a wide circle of friends, and activities, took part in yoga and dance sessions. But now, she was bereft of hope, living in her apartment with closed curtains, friends had stopped calling on her phone as she rarely answered, and with the radio and TV playing simultaneously in order to drown out the voices. She sometimes made cuts on her arms to ease the pain of the experience. She was feeling desperate and had come across my website.

After she had received the coping with voices guides, she picked out specific strategies she wanted to try (see above list). She had a positive voice, her deceased grandmother, who cared for her when her parents went through a painful divorce. She decided she wanted to keep this voice. It consoled her, advised her and defended her against the other voices' cynical criticisms.

Two other voices were negative and abusive. Another voice appeared after she became unwell physically, falling behind in her studies at college and she stopped taking care of herself.

This voice told her that her life was meaningless. she was a failure and should kill herself, end it all.

scar that ran down his face from his left ear. The word he had written as his label was „BULLY“. He acknowledged it as a label others had given him and one that he accepted.

He looked back at his life with regret and sadness. He had made some boys' lives miserable. It had given him a feeling of power when others were afraid of him. He had thought it would make him popular but he knew now that it had had the opposite effect.

He struggled to see which needs he had been meeting. I wondered aloud if a bully is someone who is so afraid of being hurt that he feels the need for total control over his environment. That he maybe had been hurt at some point earlier in his life and was determined that this would never happen again. Was this possible?

He started to cry. „Yes. My father bullied me. He used straps and belts to punish me for the smallest of things. Sometimes, when he was drunk, he invented reasons to hit me. They put me in a school for troubled children, run by ex-army officers. I got bullied and beaten there too. When I left I made a decision, no one would hurt me again. That's when I became a bully. And I have silently hated myself for that ever since. I have a lot of remorse.“

There were a lot of shared tears in that workshop. The next day I found him alone at the lake and checked in:

„I'm fine thanks. A little bit embarrassed, all the tears. I'm meant to be such a tough man.“ But that was a powerful experience. And I'm so glad I came to this camp.“

Petra had taken overdoses several times in response to this command, ending up in hospital.

We explored this particular voice and were able to translate it as a call to reform and change her life, not to actually kill herself but to kill off the life she was living. This was a great revelation for Petra and acted as a great incentive to action. We worked on a recovery plan that would slowly lead to a more fulfilling life and she began applying some coping strategies, which seemed to work well. One particular and dramatic day, the voice that told her to kill herself became more abusive, cursing her, daring her to do it and to do it now. It kept laughing at her. The usual strategies were not working and it ignored her orders to be quiet. After a few hours she was exhausted. But then Petra got so angry that she had a moment of power, asking the voice, „And if I kill myself, what will then happen to you, you idiot? What will you do without me?“ She shouted, „You will cease to exist!“

There was silence. One year later, Petra is back at college, dancing again and eating healthy foods. She is back in yoga class. She no longer cuts her arms but still has the scars. She looks back at these and considers them as beautiful reminders of a difficult time in her life.

Petra called me „Ivan, I do not need you anymore. Now I can get on with living again.“ I get so much pleasure from being fired!

What work do you continue with NVC?

Unfortunately, retreats are no longer possible, but online coaching with voice hearers is. At the international congress in Canada (11/2019) I was asked to give another lecture (online), and am currently sharing my knowledge and love of music in the radio station „deepness dementia“ <https://www.deepnessdementiamedia.com>. Otherwise in my new role as an English teacher it is important that I stay healthy and also continue supporting the awareness raising work around the issues of hearing voices.

Helpful links

* 1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L44uHPNiUaM>
<https://www.visionsandvoices.weebly.com>
<https://theamericanscholar.org/living-with-voices/#.XbbK-ZJKj3g>
<http://luhrmann.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/bjp-hearing-voices.pdf>
<https://news.stanford.edu/2014/07/16/voices-culture-luhrmann-071614/>
<https://www.hearing-voices.org/groups/hvn-cymru/>