

WHEN OUR THOUGHTS ARE NOT OUR OWN -

Some of us welcome the opinions of others and acknowledge what they have to say. But what if there is no control over the voices within asks Chris Soulidis.

A century ago and more, the highly religious could barely glance sideways without voices or visions telling them what to do: take up arms, put them down, become more devout, denounce the Church. St Francis of Assisi, Bernadette of Lourdes, Luther, and William Blake were visited by spirits and, many say, changed the world for the better by having their hand and mind guided by an internal interloper. Attila the Hun, Napoleon, Hitler and Mussolini also experienced auditory hallucinations that may have propelled them to inflict immense suffering in their drive for world domination.

These days, people who hear voices are regarded as mentally ill and sent for psychiatric treatment. According to experts, four per cent of the population hear voices; some claim more people hear voices and *don't* seek psychiatric help than those who do.

Like any disorder, experiences differ although most believe their voices do not originate from their own psyches. Some people have several voices clamouring in their head, others just one. Some voices encourage and boost self-esteem; the majority hear only venom.

Forty-nine year old Mary has heard voices since she was five. Formerly benign and controllable, the voices became aggressive and highly intrusive after a serious road accident twenty five years ago. Mary has six to eight 'visitors' in her head most of the time.

They change regularly – they also communicate with each other, mostly about her. "It's like wearing headphones with pop music in one ear and opera in the other. Then someone



is standing in front of you talking, while you are trying to read the newspaper all at the same time." Mary believes the voices are demonic and not human-centred (living or dead).

Voice hearers often become confused by the voices and crave escape from them. While meditation can provide some respite, Mary says her voices often become more insistent when she is tired or relaxes, causing her to feel frightened and angry.

One thing stills Mary's voices – holding an ice cube in her hand until it melts. "This is a little extreme I admit but for a short while I experience a little pleasure from the discomfort," she says.

Psychiatrists' insistence that sufferers reject their auditory and other hallucinations is not supported by all patients and some claim it is futile, and creates intolerable stress. Many support groups in fact believe that accepting the presence of the voices is an inherent part of coping successfully. Mary agrees.

HEARING VOICES

sharing that has taken place in the 'Hearing Voices' group has actually helped me justify my right of existence while reinforcing the fact that even though these voices often seem in control they are only part of me. I am more. I am whole," Mary asserts.

Formed through the efforts of the Richmond Fellowship of Western Australia, the Hearing Voices Network Australia is committed to raising awareness and enabling acceptance of hearing voices. It also promotes recovery for people who hear distressing voices.

The president, Professor Marius Romme, says "because hearing voices is a much stigmatised experience, we wanted to create a safe place where people can find out more about hearing voices and to create an interactive online community where people can let us know about their point of view or experience."

David Copolov is a Professor of Psychiatry at Monash University. He and his colleagues undertook a large study into the cause and treatment of auditory hallucinations. About a third of the participants said that they would miss the voices if they disappeared. A significant number considered the voices helpful and guiding. Most voices heard however, are critical and cause the hearer distress.

The causes remain speculative: a person's experiences and attitudes may be the key to explaining the differences between those who hear voices and those who don't. A traumatic event in childhood or negative self-belief may also be factors.

Three years ago Mary was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She is uncertain of her future or her chances of expelling the voices permanently. Mary finds medication helps. She says, "There is no getting rid of the voices. They really are my inner demons. I guess they will be with me forever but I'm slowly gaining my life back. My goal now is to use my experience to help others understand that they do not have to stand alone." ~

For more information visit the Hearing Voices Network website: www.rfwa.org.au or Intervoice, an international community of voice hearers: www.intervoiceline.org



"For the first time I was allowed to talk about the demons, their existence for me was acknowledged. We were encouraged to share our experiences not suppress them. I felt the aim was not to argue that the voices are illness based and the only way is to reject them or suppress them, both of which take up masses of energy," explains Mary.

"Being met with acceptance and encouragement was a major turning point for me. Being able to discuss our individual concepts of our experiences without becoming consumed by them: to open up without the label of failure, to acknowledge that I experience voices regardless of the source. I did not have to slip into the poor, sick me role so often enforced by well intentioned others: 'you hear voices, you must be sick'.

"I've tried for decades to live in spite of my spirits but at the cost of my essence, my true self. I truly do not know who I am. Want it or not, I have been entangled in an inner world of misperceived perception, and I believe that the