

Living with taboo voices, visions and other sensations

Traumatic, violent and sexual voices,
visions and other sensory experiences

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Young Voices
Study



THE AWARDS
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 @youngvoicesstudy

What's a 'taboo' voice or vision?

When an experience is described as 'taboo', it means it's one that's not usually talked about among a particular group of people, community or society, because it can bring up a lot of difficult thoughts, memories or feelings that can be frightening, upsetting, painful and shameful. The kinds of voices, visions and other sensations that are thought of as taboo are often related to violence – either against ourselves or other people, or sex – like certain sexual desires, sexual abuse or harm.

Some of us hear voices that command us to hurt or to kill ourselves or other people. Some of us hear voices that tell us we've committed a crime, or see images of ourselves or other people doing violent or sexual things. And some of us sense violent or sexual things happening to us – feeling touches, pain, heat or other sensations on or inside our bodies.

We asked young people about the sorts of experiences they'd describe as taboo, and they shared:

“ I feel hands on me that aren't my boyfriend's when we're being intimate together.”

“ I see relatives, who aren't dead, as rotting corpses in my bedroom.”

“ I hear on a loop, something a bully once said, over a decade ago.”

“ I've tasted a mouthful of blood, and had to wash my mouth out.”

“ My voices tell me to take my clothes off.”

What's considered taboo is dependent on context - who you are, where you are, who you're with and the time and culture you're living in. Your mum or dad might have different ideas about what counts as taboo to your friends, neighbours or teachers. Something your grandma or grandad might find taboo, someone else's grandma or grandad might not. This is one of the reasons why living with taboo voices, visions or other sensations can be confusing. But it can be other things too.

What are they like to live with?

Taboo voices, visions or other sensations can be overwhelming, frightening, upsetting, anxiety provoking, enjoyable or pleasurable in a range of different ways.

For example, seeing a vision of something sexual happening to ourselves or someone else might be scary, confusing, upsetting, embarrassing, pleasurable or enjoyable, a mixture of some or all of these feelings and many more. It's normal to have different feelings about taboo voices and visions, as well as to be unsure about how you feel about them.

Young people shared:

“ My voices tell me to perform a sexual act on people who walk past me in the street. I find it funny when they say that to me.”

“ Sometimes I don't know if I've murdered a baby or not - the voices make me believe I have sometimes. It felt really confusing because I couldn't see why the voices told me that, or what it connected to.”

Why do they happen?

There are lots of reasons why young people have taboo voices, visions and other sensations, and it's important to know there's no 'right' answer to this question. Every one of us is different, and we all have our own stories to tell.

Some of us hear voices or see things that remind us of traumatic experiences we've had in the past – like being abused, witnessing violence, being bullied or discriminated against, or losing a loved one. Some of us hear voices or see visions that reflect our thoughts, feelings, fears and desires, or those of the people around us. And some of us say that we were born hearing voices or seeing things, that these are religious or spiritual experiences, or paranormal ones.

Some taboo voices or visions tell the truth about who we are or how we feel, or about the thoughts, feelings, intentions and actions of other people, but others might trick or confuse, talk in metaphors or what we call 'emotional truths'. Being curious about what voices say, how they say it, and the thoughts, feelings and memories that they bring up, might help us to figure out what they really mean.

For example, a voice telling a young person that they're a criminal, or that they've done something terrible, might be trying to tell them about something that's happened in the past, might be preying on a fear or a worry that they have, or might be trying to hurt or undermine them – for lots of different reasons.

I have taboo voices or visions – is there something wrong with me?

“ If you're hearing and seeing things, no matter how frightening or disturbing it may seem, you're not alone.”

Many of us who experience taboo voices, visions or other sensations worry that we might be bad or wrong in some way. And some of us worry that our 'badness' or 'wrongness' might be contagious, causing harm to the people around us.

We hope it's a little bit reassuring to know that if you're having these experiences and feelings, you're certainly not alone – around 1 in 10 young people hear things, see things or sense things that other people can't, and many of these have had taboo experiences at some point or another.

The fact that taboo voices and visions are difficult, and in some cases forbidden, to talk about gives people the wrong impression that they're rare. The truth is – it's normal to have these experiences, especially if you've survived trauma, experienced different kinds of adversity and lots of stress in your life.

Dealing with taboo voices and visions

Although taboo voices and visions are common, their negative impacts can be incredibly difficult to live with. Many of us who have these experiences carry around feelings of guilt, shame, worthlessness, powerlessness or hopelessness, and at times these can feel impossible to bear.

If you're struggling – know that you don't have to go through this all alone, and that there are lots of different ways that young people manage taboo experiences, and the feelings they bring. It can be helpful to experiment with lots of different coping strategies to find the ones that work best for you. It can take a bit of time, but we know it's possible to have taboo voices or visions and live a meaningful life that you love.

If you're struggling:

- Try coping strategies that will help to soothe or 'ground' you - like deep breathing, mindfulness exercises or mindful colouring, or looking at soothing images on Instagram or Pinterest
- Try distracting yourself with hobbies, games, music or films, to block your voices or visions, or get a bit of distance from them
- Try ignoring the voices or visions, or telling them you'll only pay attention at certain times of the day, to take a bit of their power back
- Try using your imagination to make your voices or visions feel less overwhelming or powerful, e.g. imagining a scary voice sounding silly, or a violent vision changing into something you'd prefer to look at
- Try expressing yourself, or the content of your voices or visions, by writing a journal, drawing or painting, making a worry box, writing songs, dancing or shadow-boxing
- Try not taking the voices or visions at face value, by being curious about what they're saying and why they might be saying it – are they telling the truth, tricking or confusing you, talking in metaphors or emotional truths?
- Try treating the voices or visions with kindness, by being an empathetic listener to what they have to say/ show you, or providing reassurance or comfort to any voices in distress

“ Whatever it is I might be feeling, seeing, hearing, tasting, I try to let it go and focus on something lovely – like a friend's voice – and let the bad stuff happen only in the background.”

“ The only helpful thing I find really is music into headphones when I hear these voices.”

These are just some ideas – there are lots more available at: www.voicecollective.co.uk/coping

Getting support

If you're finding your experiences hard to manage, and would like some extra support, try approaching someone you trust – like a parent, teacher, friend or counsellor – to talk to. If you're unsure of who you could confide in, or what you could say, have a look at **www.voicecollective.co.uk/coping/telling** for some ideas.

If you're struggling, you can always talk to us. We've supported hundreds of young people with taboo voices, visions and other sensations – we've heard all kinds of stories, and we don't shock, offend or worry easily. We can help you explore what's going on, find ways of managing and work towards your goals – whatever they might be.

We're here by email, on **info@voicecollective.co.uk** and phone, on **020 7911 0822**. You can also join the discussions taking place on our online forum, for under 25s, at **<http://forum.voicecollective.co.uk>**.

If you're in crisis, or worried about your safety, you can speak in confidence with Childline, on **0800 1111**, who are available at any time of the day or night.

To discover more about the Young Voice Study, visit: mmu.ac.uk/youngvoices

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