

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS



HEARING VOICES GROUPS IN PRISONS & SECURE SETTINGS: AN INTRODUCTION

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WHAT ARE HEARING VOICES GROUPS?

Hearing Voices Groups are simply peer support groups for people who hear voices, see visions or have other unusual sensory experiences. They provide a safe space to discuss, make sense of, and find ways of coping with unusual experiences.

There are over 180 groups in the UK, taking place in a range of settings, from charities to inpatient mental health units. Focusing on the lived experience of group members rather than a pre-determined program of treatment, the groups are accessible to people whatever they believe about the origin of their experiences (psychological, spiritual, medical or cultural). Hearing Voices Groups can be found in over 23 countries, including: Uganda, Finland, Japan, USA, Greece, Palestine and Italy.

HOW DO GROUPS WORK?

Hearing Voices Groups are based on the understanding that hearing voices is a relatively common experience, affecting 3-10% of the general population. Research has demonstrated that the relationship between the voice-hearer and their voices is a key factor in determining whether or not someone is overwhelmed by this experience and requires mental health care (e.g. Romme & Escher, 1998; Honig et al, 1998; Birchwood et al, 2000).

Most people find it difficult to talk about hearing voices - it's a taboo experience. This leaves people isolated with limited opportunities to make sense of their experience and find a way of dealing with it. Hearing Voices Groups provide a safe space for people to talk about the content of the voices, how they feel and how they are dealing with it. T

he peer support ethos of Hearing Voices Groups enables members to actively use their experiences to support others. This can have a profound effect on their self esteem and levels of engagement - helping members feel more empowered to make changes in their own lives.

WHAT'S THE LEVEL OF NEED IN PRISON?

According to the Ministry of Justice (2013) 25% of women and 15% of men in prison report symptoms indicative of psychosis (including hearing voices, seeing things or having unusual beliefs). This is not surprising given the link between hearing voices, trauma and adverse life experiences (known to be common in those who spend time in prison).

The issue is far greater than those diagnosed with 'schizophrenia' - people distressed by voice-hearing in prison may have a range of diagnoses including depression, eating disorders, OCD, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress and dissociative disorders. Other may not be diagnosed with a mental health problem but simply be struggling to adjust to life in prison, causing increased stress levels.

Problems coping with voices have been linked to self harm, suicide, drug use and - in some cases - violence. Those struggling to cope with voices also have difficulties accessing education and jobs within prison. The 2007 HM Inspectorate of Prisons Thematic Review noted that hearing voices is associated with 20% of self-inflicted deaths in prison, but that it is not always considered treatable by mental health inreach staff.

OUTCOMES

Based on feedback from 5 prison groups and 7 secure unit groups, reaching over 290 members in 2 years, the benefits of Hearing Voices Groups include:

FOR MEMBERS:

- Decreased stigma
- Increased understanding of own experiences
- Increased number and range of coping strategies
- Decreased distress (inc decreased need for self harm)
- Increased engagement with mental health & support teams
- Increased sense of community and peer support

- Increased hope for the future
- Increased community links on release

FOR STAFF:

- Increased skills and ability to constructively engage with people who hear voices
- Increased job satisfaction and motivation
- Increased empathy and understanding

FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT (PRISON OR SECURE UNIT):

- Utilising existing resources effectively (including non-qualified staff - prison officers, support workers etc)
- Reduced resources needed to manage prisoners who's challenging behaviour is linked to problems coping with voices
- Increased links with community voluntary organisations, in line with governmental policy
- In prisons, contribution to PSOs, PSIs and KPIs around safer custody, purposeful activity and resettlement.
 - "Effective peer support can contribute to suicide prevention strategies by helping to create a safe, decent and healthy environment with positive prisoner/prisoner and staff/prisoner relationships, where problems can be voiced and addressed and anxiety alleviated". - **Management of prisoners at risk of harm to self, to others and from others (Safer Custody) PSI 64/2011**
- In prisons, providing support options for those who hear voices who are below the threshold of MHIRT interventions
- Contributes towards targets around participation and peer support

CASE STUDIES

Over the past few years we have worked with four London prisons and seven secure units to establish a network of Hearing Voices Groups. The following quotes are taken from interviews conducted by an external body.

HMP HOLLOWAY

“At HMP Holloway there are currently two groups running. The first group is on the mental health assessment unit, so it’s for people who are quite unwell. The second group is in the main prison and it’s for women who are relatively stable and are looking for a different kind of support.

Some of them women who attend the groups were not previously engaging with mental health services and wouldn’t turn up for appointments with a nurse or social worker. The group changes that engagement and, clearly, they’re getting something from peer support that they weren’t getting from professionals alone. It’s helping us to see that they are able to do that.

I think that a Hearing Voices Group program is great for prison working. It enables multi-disciplinary working – bringing different groups of staff together. A lot of our staff have had training, so its given them the skills to know what to do if a women approaches them saying they’re having unusual experiences”.

- Chrissy Reeves, Head of Mental Health

“I’ve worked with some of the women who attend the group for a long time. Within the context of the day centre, they’re often quite withdrawn and didn’t really interact with anybody. However, when they attend the group their behaviour is often quite different. It might take a while, but the group becomes a safe place where they do feel able to talk and they really start to open up.

I think the groups have a really positive impact on the wider prison community because the women that attend find a space to come and talk about all the distressing feelings and experiences that they’re having.

Rather than needing to self harm or go back and smash up a room when their voices are being very challenging, they can hold on to the fact that they're going to come to the group and talk about it.

- Beth Hale, Activities Co-ordinator & Group Facilitator

HMP WANDSWORTH

HMP Wandsworth is a Cat B local prison. It can hold up to 1,600, which makes it the largest prison population in Northern Europe. It has a turnover of over 11,200 prisoners through its gate every year. People come in straight from course, so they're displaced and under a lot of stress. It's very busy, chaotic and complex.

A major theme of the groups is how people feel ashamed, different or scared. It's almost like it's the first time they can make good strong friendships. A lot of these people are involved in disturbances within the prison because of their belief systems and their experiences. As they work together in the group as a team it means they're more relaxed and their stress levels are lower. That helps with the community as a whole. If you've got somebody going through a whole night of screaming, shouting, banging a pipe it can cause a lot of tension on the unit. The group, just by alleviating one of these people so they can come to terms and not suffer so much, relieves the group around that individual too.

This is investing in your workforce. You don't have to be a qualified nurse, any officer has the experience to become a facilitator. All it takes is somebody who has empathy for the client group. For me, personally, it increases my reward in my job. There's lots of jobs you can do that you find mundane. To me, this gets straight to the core of the issue. It helps people and I enjoy it. It's a bonus and it's a very rewarding thing to do.

For people who are hearing voices, suicidal or self harming – there isn't really anything out there that addresses it except a professional referral to services. But if you could have, underneath that, a peer support system that helps people who are actively psychotic – you have to really have it.

- Steve, Prison Officer & Group Facilitator

We had an individual that was felt to be challenging to all services across the prison. He came to the Addison Unit due to his challenging behavior and risk and we put him on a 3 man unlock, which restricted his access outside of the cell. We arranged with the facilitators to come in a little bit early for the group and do a 1-2-1 session at the door with him on a regular basis. He started to become more engaging, more appropriate with staff, and was looking forward to the weekly slot. He was able to say 'Look, I really want to go to this group. If I do x, y and x will I be likely to come out'.

Over a few weeks we were able to get him off 'Red' and start him attending the groups with a high level of supervision. Part of the group process is not only telling your own story, but listening to other people's stories – which he engaged with. That brought about changes in his behavior, including being more compliant with medication, being more engaging with staff and being more appropriate with his fellow patients. He has since been discharged from the Addison Unit into the main prison where he's currently holding down a job as a cleaner. His name doesn't get raised with concern from senior staff.

- Paul Graham, Addison Unit Manager

IN THE WORDS OF GROUP MEMBERS

It's horrible. You're closed in. You can't control how you are feeling. The paranoia is scary, and all the 'normal' people around you look at you like you're crazy. But the group is an escape. It's not like being in prison. You can come on a Monday morning and release all the pressure that's built up during the weekend or the week. When you are in the group you don't feel alone. You've got that support network. No-one will laugh at you. A problem aired is a problem shared.

I feel very good, you know, when I go to the group. What I feel, now, is, because everyone is the same here, you understand me, we have some differences, but we have the same. You know what it might be like, what I feel. When we share together I know it's not me alone. So I can sleep.

When I get anxious my voices get worse. Listening to other people in the group helps. It's just good to know other people are going through the same things as you, and you can get ideas on how to cope. You can open up more in the group. It's hard to talk to staff, but in the group I can. You get relief from opening up, it's like praying., like when you pray you get relief. It's like a new day, like everything is lifted off your shoulders.

DO YOU WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?

If you are interested in finding out more about setting up Hearing Voices Groups in prisons or secure units, please contact us. Every establishment is unique, so we'd be happy to develop a plan that meets your needs.

Hearing Voices: Prisons & Secure Units

Mind in Camden, Barnes House, 9-15 Camden Road, London, NW1 9LQ
020 7241 8978 / 020 7911 0822 | jthompson@mindincamden.org.uk

Twitter: @MicPrisons

Web: www.mindincamden.org.uk

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www.hearing-voices.org

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