



A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO

HEARING VOICES & RELATED SENSORY EXPERIENCES



Navigating university life as someone who hears voices or sees visions can have its challenges.

This guide, written by students for students, shares some experiences, ideas and tips.



STUDENT SPACE

Funded by:

VOICE COLLECTIVE

Developed by:

ABOUT

University can be sold as a time of discovery; a time where you're encouraged to juggle a busy social life with fulfilling your academic potential. The weight of expectations can be high - with or without voices.

This guide is written by students for students. It covers some of the aspects of university life that voices and visions can have an impact on. It's not intended to be comprehensive - everyone's experiences will be different and we cannot speak for all. Yet we hope that in these pages you'll find something that will spark your own ideas.

Most of all, we hope that reading this helps you feel like you're not on your own with all of this.



LANGUAGE MATTERS

You'll notice us talking about 'hearing voices' or 'seeing visions' in this guide. There are lots of other words we could use (including 'auditory hallucinations' and 'psychosis'). We don't use these words because, whilst some people do hear voices as part of psychosis or another mental health issue (or as a response to drugs), this is only part of the picture. People can hear, see and sense things that other people don't for all kinds of reasons.

This guide is aimed at anyone who is having these experiences, whatever their cause.

FOR MORE HELP OR INFORMATION

Voice Collective:

www.voicecollective.co.uk

Understanding Voices:

www.understandingvoices.com

For navigating university life, see Student Minds:

www.studentminds.org.uk

If you are worried about your own mental health or are struggling to cope, speak to your GP and/or your Student Wellbeing office.

You don't have to go through this alone.

BE PREPARED

When you accept an offer of a place at university you may have a range of emotions - from excitement to dread (in turn, or simultaneously). This is natural; many other prospective students will relate to this. Yet those of us who hear voices or see visions may have some additional concerns. Whilst some people prefer to go with the flow, if you're someone who finds it helpful to anticipate likely issues and plan ahead this section might be for you.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

"You don't have to go to everything. Many 'friendships' made in freshers week don't last that long anyway, so you won't be missing out hugely in a social sense by choosing less popular events, or by choosing not to go at all"

The first weeks at university can feel like a race to make friends, find your place and sample everything. If that's your thing, then go ahead and enjoy yourself.

But, if the pressure and speed don't suit you, that's OK too. University can

be more like a marathon than a sprint. It can help to give yourself permission to go at your own pace - whatever that is.

"When I started university I wanted to do it all - get the grades, the friends and set myself up for a career. I dropped out within a year and felt crushed. It was too much. Now I'm back, again, and taking things slower. I've worked out what's important to me and so far it's working out OK. My voices are a bit calmer about the whole thing too"

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BE PREPARED

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DISCLOSURE

FINDING YOUR PLACE/SPACE

GETTING TO KNOW THE TERRITORY

If you're concerned about finding your way around, it might be a good idea to check out the area before the start of term. You might want to find your way around campus and identify spaces that you feel comfortable in. Some universities offer orientation tours before the start of term

particularly for students who may face additional barriers (e.g. disabled students, autistic students and mature students). Those that don't offer it probably should. If this is something you'd find helpful, you can reach out to your university's Disability or Wellbeing Office.

START BUILDING YOUR SUPPORT NETWORKS

"I joined a disability WhatsApp group chat for my university - older students happily recommended lots of resources specific to my university"

"I joined the local student CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) group - it was quite low key, and useful to talk about something other than myself"

If you're concerned around being isolated, moving to a new area, or being in a new space, it can help to begin building your network before term starts.

This might include linking with the local mental health team (if you're in mental health services), the Disability Office or Student Welfare team, local organisations (e.g. voluntary sector mental health charities, special interest groups) or university social media groups for new/existing students.

This isn't about making links with everyone, but finding one or two people, groups or organisations that can act as tethers in the first few weeks whilst you find your feet. What that looks like will be different for everyone.



FRESHERS WEEK

Whilst Freshers Week is intended to celebrate the start of university, helping students mix and try new things, it can also be a booze fuelled high-octane social bonanza. Whilst that might be your idea of heaven, it can be a bit overwhelming. If you need to 'mask' (hide your voices/visions), struggle with busy spaces and/or prefer to stay clear of alcohol; it can all be a bit much. Finding a way of navigating it that plays to your strengths and doesn't leave you feeling emotionally or physically drained may involve some creativity.

TIPS* FOR SURVIVING FRESHERS WEEK

*Whilst these tips come from students who have personal experience of voices and/or visions, we're all unique. Take whichever tips work for you and leave the rest.

#1 NO-ONE KNOWS (OR NEEDS TO KNOW) WHY YOU DON'T GO

Whilst Freshers Week can feel like this massive thing that everyone goes to, it can help to remember that not going to an event doesn't mark you out as different or place an 'I hear voices' label on your forehead. There are lots of reasons people don't go to an event. It's OK not to go and you don't need to give anyone a reason.

#2: SEEK OUT SOCIAL EVENTS THAT FEEL MORE MANAGEABLE

If the big mainstream socials feel too

much, you might want to seek out social spaces that feel a little smaller and/or revolve less around alcohol. This might include gatherings hosted by your department, ones based on a shared interest or the Students' Union.

#3: BE KIND TO YOURSELF IF THINGS GO A BIT WONKY

Lots of people struggle to navigate Freshers Week, whether they hear voices or not. But, if you find your voices give you a hard time try to be kind to yourself.

There is no (useful) instruction manual for university life, and there may be times when things go awry. It's OK to ask for support. Yet we know it's not always easy to ask for it and sometimes the support offered isn't helpful. See the back cover for ideas on who to contact.

FRESHERS WEEK

Some people find the voices they hear use shame as a way of keeping people isolated (and/or safe). Just because the voices say you messed up it doesn't mean it's true (and even if it is it doesn't mean you should feel ashamed).

#4: IT'S OK TO FEEL OUT OF PLACE OR ESTRANGED

"It is okay to feel estranged. Most others probably also have these mixed feelings. It can be a good way to break the ice and get a friend by saying that you are nervous or don't know what to expect. Others may relax and find you interesting for opening up"

Even those without voices & visions can feel disconnected in the first few weeks (or months) of university. So many of us are not sure about what we're doing or where we fit ... so sometimes being honest about that can be a welcome break for those who are feeling like they need to wear a confident mask.

#5: PLAN AHEAD

Whilst going with the flow can lead to some great experiences, some of us prefer a bit more predictability (and that's OK too). At Freshers Week you'll

be introduced to different societies and socials - but many of these are also advertised on the Student Union's website if you want to suss them out first. You might want to get some recommendations from a uni social media group for new students, or speak with someone at the Student Union, Wellbeing or Disability Office.

#6: FINDING CHARGING POINTS

"I have 3 places at uni that I alternate between when I'm feeling a little lost. It helps me feel more confident ... like I'm going somewhere which gives less space for the voices to freak me out"

Planning ahead can also involve working out what spaces on the university campus feel OK to retreat to when stuff gets a bit much or you need to recharge. It might be a corner of the library, a coffee shop, an open space or your room.

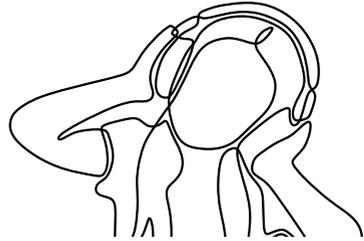


UNI HOUSING

If you're moving into a new area, the chances are you'll be staying in some form of student housing. This can be a great place to meet people, but settling in can have its challenges too - especially if you find that you or your voices struggle with unfamiliar spaces.

ANTICIPATING TRIGGERS / CHALLENGES

"I wish I'd thought that things would be different to home. I'd suggest making a list of anything that might stress you out and how you would cope with them"



Whilst you can (mostly) control what happens in your own room, sharing accommodation means there's a lot more that is outside of your field of influence.

You may encounter people turning the hall light on and off at different times, banging doors, people speaking in the corridor, middle of the night fire alarms and security staff checking the premises.

Some of these things might be fine, but you may find others trigger your voices or visions ... especially if you have sensory sensitivities or post-traumatic reactions. Having ways of managing these responses planned out can help. Some people use draught excluders help block out light. Comfy headphones or ear defenders can help with the noise. Having familiar objects (anchors) around can help the space feel more like your own.

Customise the space so it works for you.



LEAVING YOUR ROOM

"It takes a lot of energy to leave your room to meet brand new people you don't know. Add in the sensory stuff and the first step out of the door can be hard - a lot of time I didn't manage it. Telling other people 'you might need to come and get me' helped."

The downside to creating a safer space in your room can be that, if you're struggling with socialising and the unknown, it can get tricky to leave. That's natural, however some people find being alone with their voices/visions can make things worse.

If you want to leave your room (or think it'd be a good idea), but are struggling - here are some ideas from contributors.

It's OK to ask for help. If you're not sure who to speak to, check out the links at the back of this booklet.

#1 TEXT SOMEONE

Text a friend and ask if they can swing by your place on the way to the library (or wherever you need to go). Sometimes having someone you know knock on your door can be a useful prompt if you're feeling stuck or need some extra motivation.



#2 TAKING IT ONE TRIP AT A TIME

It can help to choose something specific and limited to go out for (e.g. buying a coffee, walking to a place you've flagged as safe(ish) or going to the library). Some days that might involve just walking around the block and coming back.

#3 REACHING OUT

You might want to let a friend know that you're struggling a bit and would find it helpful if they pop by and walk somewhere quiet with you. You don't need to give the details - lots of people feel a bit uncertain in a new place.

#4 BE PREPARED

If you think you might struggle to use shared facilities (e.g. kitchen or dining area) it can help to make sure you've got some provisions in. That way you can still eat and drink if you're having a tough time and need some space away from others.

ACADEMIC WORK

Everyone is different. Some people who hear voices find that they can be an asset in their study lives - either directly or through the transferable skills they've developed in order to live with them. Others find that their voices and visions don't impact on their studies at all. However, some students find that there are at least some times where voices and visions can make studying really challenging. The following ideas come from students who have found academic work difficult, at times.

VALUING YOUR TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

"I've been hearing voices for years and, as noisy as it is, I'm used to it. I've had to learn to focus to get any work done at all. Now I'm a student I can really see how that focus I learnt as a survival skill is helping me. I can study in busy spaces and feel like no-one else is there"

Whilst much of this guide, understandably, talks about ways of navigating the challenges of university

life with voices and visions - that's not the whole story. Sometimes, the skills we've developed to live with our experiences can be an asset. Whether it's an ability to focus, the determination to persevere despite negative feedback, an awareness of what you need around you to feel OK or something else entirely ... working out what you're bringing to the table can help mitigate the idea that voice-hearers are inherently disadvantaged.

THINKING AHEAD: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

You don't owe anyone any personal information about yourself. You don't need to disclose your experiences or speak about anything that makes you uncomfortable.

However, if you think there may be times when you struggle with the

academic side of things then it can help to build connections with those who will be in a position to help you out. It can feel weird taking the first step. It's about getting key people on side so they're aware of what might happen and are in your corner if it does.

ACADEMIC WORK

"I made contact with my personal tutor early. With COVID you don't really meet them unless there's a problem. They will see my file - my disability disclosure. I say: 'You're going to see my name, it'll say this [the diagnosis]. I just want 15 minutes to say what excites me about this course'"

Sometimes, especially if the department know about your diagnosis (if you have one) it can be useful to make an effort to help them see you as a motivated student - challenging stereotypes.

"I went to Admin and introduced myself: 'I've spoken to Wellbeing, but can you please talk to me about the common mistakes students make on the course re: deadlines

in a crisis". They know what wiggle room there is, they know the regulations and they would rather help in advance"

Whilst many of us instinctively try to present a confident exterior, this sometimes extends to pretending that everything's OK when it really isn't (and avoiding the academic team when we're getting behind). As natural as this is, it can lead to even more stress and risks leaving supervisors/tutors feeling frustrated.

If you think there may be times when you'll need some flexibility, having good relationship with the course admin team (who know the regulations inside out) can help you navigate complex university processes and avoid unnecessary stress.

FINDING A WAY OF STUDYING THAT WORKS FOR YOU

#1: FINDING A SPACE THAT SUITS

Working out, often by trial and error, the spaces and environments that are conducive to studying, can be invaluable. Do you prefer quiet spaces, or is background noise helpful? Is the library working for you, or is there a coffee shop or space that's better? Are there different times that have different vibes? Having a collection of study spaces for different times can help.

#2: STUDY SKILLS

Are you a deadliner, or do you need to pace yourself? Does it help to have a (realistic) study timetable, or does that leave you (and your voices) feeling worse? Do you need to build in a buffer to your schedule so that you can rest / have time off to recharge? What time of day are you more productive? Like all students, students who hear voices need to find out what works for them.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS: YOU HAVE RIGHTS

It's okay to advocate for what you need. People might not always ask and sometimes you need to speak out when you are struggling with life/elements of the course"

If hearing voices, seeing visions or having other related experiences causes you difficulties that have a 'substantial' and 'long term' negative impact on you it counts as a 'disability' according to the The Equality Act 2010.

The Equality Act requires education providers, including universities, to make 'reasonable adjustments' to enable students with disabilities to take part on an equal basis.

See: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/adjustments-disabled-students>

Reasonable adjustments can include things like:

- Extra time to complete coursework or examinations
- Rest breaks during exams
- Taking exams in a different space (perhaps with access to music or other coping strategies like walking around)
- A quiet space to access if needed

- Flexibility around timetabling (e.g. minimising morning lectures if you're taking sedating medication)
- Additional study support (inc mentoring, planning for assessments and organising notes)
- Things that the lecturers can do (or not do) that would make things easier for you.

"Your Disability Office can ask for reasonable adjustments for you, including lecturers not picking on you in lectures/seminars/classes to answer questions unless you voluntarily put your hand up to answer. Knowing that I had this provision during my Masters made things feel SO much safer"

You also may be eligible for a Disabled Students Allowance which can pay for things like:

- Computer equipment and/or specialist software
- Study support
- Dictaphone

For more information, see: <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa>

IF THINGS GO AWRY ...

"My voices are very triggered by stress/worry - not helped by reality of actually being very far behind and having had extension after extension - and studying is extremely stressful with very high workloads. So the more stressed I get the more intrusive voices get and the less I get done. I feel like I'm always studying on 'survival mode'"

Life has a habit of throwing curve balls at us. As such, there may be a time during your studies when things get on top of you. That's understandable. Yet, dealing with whatever challenges you've been dealt can be even more stressful if it happens at a time when you're meant to be handing in a piece of work, having an exam or doing a group project.

#1: LET SOMEONE KNOW

It's OK to take time out if you need to - there are plenty of processes at university that allow for this. If you can, speak to your Disability Office, Student Wellbeing or your tutor. The sooner you speak with them, the easier it should be to arrange something you'd find useful - whether that's a break, an extension or some additional support.



#2: REACHING OUT TO YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

"Sometimes I have a really forceful voice that tries to mess up my studying, having access to a hearing voices group has been so important because I managed to develop a decent relationship with that voice and recruit them to help me a bit, so they don't try to tear down my studies so much"

In an ideal world you'll have already found a supportive network at university - whether that's a society/club, peer support space or some good mates. Yet life doesn't always go to plan and you may feel like you're heading for a crisis without any anchors in place.

Check out the Voice Collective, Student Minds and the Hearing Voices Network for possible groups (online and in person) that can help. Your GP, Student Wellbeing and your mental health team (if you have one) can be resources too.

DISCLOSURE

The question of whether to tell people about your experiences of hearing voices, seeing visions and/or any diagnosis you may have been given has no simple answer. You don't owe anyone your personal information, and yet - sometimes - disclosing something (not everything) can help you access support and understanding. This section gives an overview of some of the ideas and experiences of other students. What you choose to do, though, may look differently to those who contributed to this booklet.

DECIDING HOW MUCH YOU WANT TO SAY TO WHOM

"Ultimately you have the decision to share your truth if and when you want to, you don't need to feel pressured into sharing. It is not necessarily obvious to others that you are having these experiences no matter how it feels"

Despite being relatively common experiences, hearing voices and seeing visions are still poorly understood and stigmatised. Things are changing, but in a culture where talking about voices is still taboo it can be wise to think about who you want to tell and how much you want to say.

The following experiences have been contributed by students who have had to navigate these dilemmas and think about how much they want to say to whom. If you need help urgently, though, please tell Student Wellbeing or your GP.

BEING OPEN

"It's good having friends with whom I can talk about my experiences fairly openly (even though they are not voice-hearers themselves, they are empathetic and kind and not quick to make assumptions)"

It can be easier to be open if you've found people who you think are likely to be understanding.

BEING SELECTIVE

"It can help to have prepared answers for questions like 'how are you doing?' which are not too revealing"

"I have an elevator pitch - a 2 sentence way of describing what's going on for me that I can bring out when I need to say something"

DISCLOSURE

Some contributors highlighted the importance of contained and partial disclosure ... limiting the amount of information that you share, depending on the person and the situation. You might say different things to a trusted friend than in a form requesting an extension, for example.

KEEPING THINGS MORE PRIVATE

"Some people I wanted to tell and was too afraid. Mostly I kept silent about it. As for those who did help me, we had an agreement that their knowledge was on a need to know

basis and that they were not to tell it to someone else"

For some, privacy feels very important. So, rather than tell someone about their voices they might talk more generally about anxiety, disability or neurodiversity - terms they think will be more easily understood.

"To tutors, I might say 'I have a mental health condition that affects my concentration - it's on my disability form"

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

"I found writing things down very helpful, in terms of preparing little speeches when disclosing and telling people before I started the speech, to not interrupt me"

"I did a full 180 around what I disclose in the last 9 months. As an undergrad I didn't tell anyone. Then I told close friends, like it was a terrible friendship ending thing. That never occurred to them- they wished I'd felt safe enough to tell them sooner. Now I'm more open about it. It's part of my life. I'm not going into detail, but I have no need to hide it"

"I've learnt that I don't have to sanitise my experiences or make excuses for other people's prejudice about what voice-hearers are like: that the problem is with them, not me"

Whether you 'just say it', write it down or prepare a few words that feel OK and not too overwhelming, talking about voices can feel like a risk.

If you'd like to think more about how to talk about hearing voices with others, the Understanding Voices has some useful information.

See: <https://understandingvoices.com/living-with-voices/>

FINDING YOUR PLACE / SPACE

Whilst some people - by luck or design - find people to connect with in the first few weeks, for others it can take a little longer. This section includes some tips from students who have had their own struggles in finding a place to belong.

TIPS & EXPERIENCES FROM OTHER STUDENTS

"Be comfortable with being your true self. Not everyone will get you but they don't have to: you WILL find your people"

"I felt secluded a lot from social life. Isolated. I more often sought isolation myself too. When people invite you to socialise don't be afraid. Go for it! Mostly people invite you because they like you. That is real. Don't be afraid to fail. Most others do too in one way or another"

"It can be hard but try and build up different friendships and friendship circles. A technique I used to make friends was (if there was an hour or so between lectures) saying to the people sitting near me "I'm going to X coffee shop for lunch as there's no point trekking back to my accommodation -fancy joining me?"

People would join in and we'd talk at first about the lectures we'd just had/would be having, until we got more into a groove"

"It was trial and error. I went looking for values and spaces that fit what I'm like, so there'll be people there I'll probably get on with. I joined societies that were a bit different. There were lots of spaces I could find where people could actively listen to experiences that weren't their own without being threatened or confused by it"

"I need people to know they are not alone. It's so alienating to think you are the only one"



WITH THANKS TO:

All the students who attended our focus group, completed our online survey and/or gave feedback on our drafts.

INFO ON VOICES & VISIONS:

www.voicecollective.co.uk

www.understandingvoices.com

NAVIGATING UNIVERSITY LIFE:

www.studentspace.org.uk

www.studentminds.org.uk

For urgent medical advice, call the NHS 111 (England & Wales) or NHS 24 (Scotland) - T. 08454 242424

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