



**Thank you for taking the time to answer the feature questions below.**

**I understand that your voice hearing experiences started when you were at University; would you please share what these experiences were and what was happening for you at the time?**

In some ways it was rather ironic because something that would prove, ultimately, to be completely catastrophic, began in a relatively mundane way - the appearance of a single, neutral voice that calmly narrated whatever I was doing in the third person: "she is going to a lecture", "she is leaving the building". I was startled at first, very shaken. It was quite a weird sensation. But I grew accustomed to it fairly quickly, because it was so unthreatening. I knew what voice hearing was, of course, but this didn't seem anything like the types of frenzied, violent voices you read about in the media or saw in films. And after a while I even began to find it quite reassuring. Owing to a series of childhood traumas and abuses, I was a very anxious and unhappy teenager, and the voice's methodical observations started to feel like a reminder that in the midst of crushing unhappiness and self-doubt, I was still carrying on with my life and responsibilities. I even wondered whether other people had similar commentaries but just never talked about it. My first, fundamental mistake was something that seemed entirely natural at the time - talking to a friend about it. And she was UTTERLY horrified. She pretty much radiated fear and mistrust. And in turn, her anxiety was contagious. She insisted I seek medical help, and that really sealed the beginning of the end. Suddenly the voice was no longer an experience...it had become a symptom. Really it would have been helpful if the voice had chipped in and said "she is going to seriously regret this monumentally poor decision!"



**How did you seek help and start on your road to recovery?**

I don't think there was a single, defining turning point, more an accumulation and fusion of positive changes. Primarily, I was very fortunate to have people who never gave up on me - relationships that really honoured and acknowledged my resilience, my worth and humanity, and my capacity to heal. I used to say that these people saved me, but what I now know is that they did something even more important: they empowered me to save myself. My mother, for example, had an unconditional belief that I was going to come back to her and was willing to wait for me for as long as it took. I also met an amazing psychiatrist, who absolutely didn't subscribe to the idea of me as 'schizophrenic' – or any other label for that matter. "Don't tell me what other people have told you about yourself, he would say, "Tell me about *you*." Along with his nursing colleagues, he was incredibly proactive, pragmatic, creative, and empathic. Their



approach was all about active coping rather than passive adjustment. Crucially, they also helped me get in touch with the UK Hearing Voices Network, which was an absolute revelation. For the first time, I had an opportunity to try and see my voices as meaningful - messages and metaphors about emotional problems in my life, and representations of the considerable trauma I'd experienced in the past. In turn, I began to relate to them more peacefully and productively. I began to understand the voices (as well as my other experiences, like self-injury, anxiety, and paranoid beliefs) in a more compassionate way. Not as symptoms, rather as adaptations and survival strategies: sane reactions to insane circumstances. The voices took the place of overwhelming pain and gave words to it, and probably the most important insight was when I realised that the most menacing, aggressive voices actually represented the parts of me that had been hurt the most. As such, it was these voices that needed to be shown the greatest compassion and care - which of course ultimately represented learning to show compassion, love, and acceptance towards myself. My voices seemed like the problem; they were actually the solution, an inextricable part of the healing process. I recently read Jeanette Winterson's autobiography, and she describes this concept beautifully: *"I often hear voices. I realise that drops me in the crazy category but I don't much care. If you believe, as I do, that the mind wants to heal itself, and that the psyche seeks coherence not disintegration, and then it isn't hard to conclude that the mind will manifest whatever is necessary to work on the job."*

**On your road of recovery, what has been some of the hardest parts and how did you overcome this? Was there an easy part?**

It did get easier over time. Jacqui Dillon, the Chair of the English Hearing Voices Network, talks about "trusting the [healing] process", and I think once I'd learnt to put faith in my own healing process – and to start to really believe in my capacity to thrive and recover – then it stopped feeling so overwhelming. But I spent many years before that feeling utterly lost and tormented. Trying to cope with the voices, let alone acknowledge my emotional pain, felt like attempting to detonate a bomb: One wrong move and it would kill me, and at times it seemed as if I was literally fighting for my life. Ultimately though, I began to realise that in trying to wrest back some control, I had little left to lose but possibly everything to gain. There was also a sense of defiance, in that my ultimate retaliation against the people who had hurt me was to have the best life possible; the rationale of moral justice that says living well is ultimately the best revenge. I think that a sense of hope for a better future began to kindle and grow stronger, gradually becoming a more defining part of me than the pain and bleakness. The enormity of the task seemed insurmountable, but I reminded myself of the slogan used by the human rights charity Amnesty International: "Better to light even a little candle than to curse the darkness." That's really how my recovery journey started: with tiny steps. In his extraordinary survival memoir *Touching the Void*, the mountaineer Joe Simpson describes a torturous, three-day journey crawling back to his base camp with a shattered leg. To avoid becoming overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, Simpson instead focused on shorter, more achievable stages: reaching



the end of a crevasse, getting to an outcrop of rocks. I essentially applied similar reasoning to my own situation. I was increasingly conscious of what my own 'base camp' represented — happiness, peace, meaningful relationships, respect, and acceptance — but was also aware that if I became too preoccupied with this ideal (with no clear idea of how to accomplish it), there was a risk of becoming so daunted and discouraged that I would simply sink to my knees and give up. Like Simpson, I could prevent becoming engulfed by the extent of the journey ahead by becoming motivated for smaller, more manageable goals. This started on a day-by-day basis: practicing coping strategies for the voices, doing self-care activities, trying to self-injure less (or at least less severely), learning relaxation techniques and so on. Over time I grew more ambitious, which involved beginning the gruelling process of making sense of the voices (and in turn the traumatic life events they represented). And later still, it included returning to university to study psychology and starting work as a trainer and public speaker.

**How are your experiences now, in relation to years ago when it all started – and do you have 'coping strategies' that you have learned to use along the way?**

I still hear voices, but my relationship with them is completely transformed. In fact I would miss them if they went. I should probably insure them actually, because if they do ever go I'll be out of a job! This seems extraordinary given how desperate I used to be to get rid of them. But they provide me with a lot of insights about myself, and they hold a very rich repertoire of different memories and emotions. Occasionally I'll discuss dilemmas or problems with them, or ask their opinion about decisions I need to make, although I would never let them dictate something to me that I didn't want to do – it's like negotiating between different parts of yourself to reach a conclusion 'everyone' is happy with. So, for example, maybe there's a voice that represents a part of me that's very insecure, which will have different needs to a part of me that wants to go out into the world and be heard. Or the needs of very rational, intellectual voice may initially feel incompatible with those of a very emotional one. But then I can identify that conflict within myself and try to resolve it. It's quite rare now that I have to tell them to be quiet, as they don't intrude or impose on me in the way that they used to. If they do become invasive then it's important for me to understand why, and there'll always be a good reason. In general, it'll be a sign of some sort of emotional conflict, which can then be addressed in a positive, constructive way. As an aside, I think this experience of different aspects of self is universal — nearly all of us have an inner critic, an inner child, a controller, a pleaser, a part that feels doubt and tell us we're not good enough and questions every decision. Perhaps it's just that, for some of us, stress, trauma, and powerful emotions create internal schisms that make our inner selves appear much more disowned and frightening.



### **Featuring the recent TED Talk 'The voices in my head' - what other projects/publications have you worked on?**

I published an e-book with TED to accompany the talk, *Learning from the Voices in my Head*, which is available to download from TED.com, Amazon, and the Apple iBookstore. Recent journal publications include "*The Origins of Voices: Links Between Life History and Voice Hearing in a Survey of 100 Cases*" and "*Emerging Perspectives From the Hearing Voices Movement: Implications for Research and Practice*"

My biggest on-going project at the moment is completing my PhD – it's been a tremendous amount of work, but fingers crossed it should be submitted within the next few weeks...at which point I'll need to lie down in a dark room for a very long time!

### **What does the future hold for you?**

A favourite mantra of mine is "the best revenge is to live well" and that's what I ultimately aim for – living well. For me, an important aspect of recovery has been to move beyond surviving my past and instead try to create a peaceful, positive, and rewarding future. Family and friends are a huge part of this, but my professional work is also very valuable to me. I've recently started a job at the University of Liverpool's Psychosis Research Group, which is absolutely wonderful. It means I get to work with John Read, who's a true pioneer – his research on the links between trauma and psychosis is hugely courageous, powerful, and inspiring. I'll continue doing lecturing and public speaking too, and maintaining my links with *Intervoice: The International Network for Teaching, Education and Research into Hearing Voices* (<http://www.intervoiceline.org/>). For me, much of this fit with what Judith Herman calls 'the survivor mission'; you transform your own personal tragedy by making it a basis for social and political action.

### **Favourite Quote?**

Hmm, it's difficult to narrow it down to just one – can I have three?!

*"...In the end we must remember that no amount of rules or their enforcement will defeat those who struggle with justice on their side..."*

- Nelson Mandela-

*"...In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act..."*

- George Orwell -

*"The game's afoot!"*

- Shakespeare



**PsyCope 'Coping with Psychosis'**  
Feature of the Month – August 2014  
Eleanor Longden

---

**THE VOICES IN MY HEAD BY ELEANOR LONGDEN, TED TALK**

Eleanor Longden overcame her diagnosis of schizophrenia to earn a master's in psychology and demonstrate that the voices in her head were “a sane reaction to insane circumstances.”

Video clip: Ted Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/syjEN3peCJw>