

Changing Healthcare Professionals' Attitudes Towards Voice Hearers: An Education Intervention

What do we already know about this topic?

Auditory verbal hallucinations, or voice hearing, is increasingly understood as a common experience. Despite this, voice hearers still experience a great deal of stigma, which can have a serious negative impact on the person's experience of voice hearing, and their recovery. Research has demonstrated that healthcare professionals may be a major source of the stigma surrounding voice hearing, with implications not only for the development and delivery of evidence-based interventions, but also treatment outcomes. One effective method for reducing healthcare professionals' stigma towards mental illness is through educational interventions. Education interventions involve providing factual information in order to contradict inaccurate and negative stereotypes. No previous research has examined the impact of education interventions on stigma towards voice hearers.

What did we do?

We designed a four-hour education workshop which involved delivery of information about hearing voices, videos of voice hearer experiences, and role-plays (of treatment). The information emphasised that mental health varies from the 'healthy' end of a continuum to the 'unwell' end at the other, and recovery-focussed messages (as previous literature shows that these provide optimum messages for anti-stigma campaigns). We delivered the training to 59 healthcare professionals, from a range of different disciplines. We asked participants to complete measures of stigma before and immediately after completing training. Stigma was measured in two different ways: through self-report questionnaires, to capture explicit or openly held attitudes, and through a computerised, reaction-time task, to capture implicit or indirect attitudes.

Did it work?

We found a significant reduction in healthcare professionals' explicit (openly held) stigma following the education intervention. We did not find any change to implicit (unconscious) stigma following the intervention. This may be because underlying attitudes tend to be more stable over time. It also may be because our participants had generally positive underlying attitudes to begin with. Overall, these findings suggest that education interventions could be one effective way of reducing stigma towards voice hearers. However, more research needs to be done in samples with more negative baseline attitudes such as early career professionals, students, and the general population.

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