

## Exploring self-compassion and voice-related distress in people who hear voices.

### What do we already know about this topic?

Auditory verbal hallucinations, or “hearing voices”, are experiences that are often deeply personal to voice hearers. For some, the voices can be distressing and disabling. Yet for others, they can be a source of comfort and reduce feelings of loneliness. This difference led researchers to examine voice hearing on a spectrum; “healthy” on one end, and “clinical” on the other. It has been theorized that when voices appear negative and hostile, people’s threat system (fight or flight) can become activated, contributing to the distress experienced by clinical voice hearers. Past research examining social and relational factors (how people relate to themselves and others) has shown that self-esteem affects how people perceive their voices—low self-esteem and perceiving themselves to be of lower social standing to others is linked to hearing more “sinister” or negative voices. Recently, the role of self-compassion in reducing negative feelings like depression, anxiety, and stress has also been studied. Self-compassion triggers the brain region responsible for calming and soothing, and feeling safe. However, although it is linked to the same psychological benefits as high self-esteem in general populations, self-compassion has not yet been studied in voice hearers.

### What did we do?

To find out how self-compassion and self-esteem are related to the experience of hearing voices, a sample of voice hearers seeking help at our clinic (Perth Voices Clinic) completed a series of questionnaires and interviews. We sought to answer the question: *Is higher self-compassion linked to lower levels of negative feelings (depression, anxiety and stress), reduced negative and persecutory beliefs about voices, and lesser voice distress?* We also investigated whether self-compassion or self-esteem plays a bigger role in predicting these outcomes.

### What did we find?

The results of the study showed that higher levels of self-compassion were directly linked to lower anxiety, stress, and depression, less persecutory beliefs about voices, and lower voice distress. It was also found that self-compassion is indeed better than self-esteem in predicting all the variables examined. In other words, compassion towards oneself may have increased mental health benefits in voice hearers, over and above that of higher self-esteem. Although more research is needed to establish cause-and-effect, the findings of the current study are relevant to voice hearers experiencing distress. For such individuals, integrating the development of self-compassion in therapy may be particularly useful.

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