

Psychics help psychiatrists understand the voices of psychosis

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Credit: Melanie Ulizio

People with psychosis are tormented by internal voices. In an effort to explain why a Yale team enlisted help from an unusual source: psychics and others who hear voices but are not diagnosed with a mental illness.

They found that the voices experienced by this group are similar in many ways to those reported by people with schizophrenia, with a few big differences: Psychics are much more likely to perceive the voices as positive or helpful and as experiences that can be controlled, according to a new study published Sept. 28 in the journal *Schizophrenia Bulletin*.

"We have known for some time that people in the [general population](#) can have the experience of hearing voices—sometimes frequently—without the need for psychiatric intervention," said Albert Powers, a psychiatry fellow and lead author of the study.

As many as one in 25 people hear voices at any given time and up to 40% may report hearing a

voice at some time in their lives. Most do not meet criteria for [mental illness](#). But finding healthy people to study who hear voices has been difficult.

"Studying psychics through the lens of voice-hearing may give us important insights into why they are able to function so well without the need for psychiatric care" Powers said.

Powers and Philip Corlett, assistant professor of psychiatry and senior author on the paper along with Yale neuroscience graduate student Megan Kelley, studied a group called clairaudient psychics, who report receiving daily auditory messages. The subjects who reported hearing voices were given tests from forensic psychiatry designed to identify those who falsely claim to be hearing voices in order to avoid criminal prosecution. Both psychics and psychosis patients had similar scores on tests meant to detect false claims of hearing voices. However, patients with schizophrenia were much more likely to report negative experiences when hearing voices or discussing the voices with other people.

By comparing the psychics' experiences with those of people with schizophrenia and a control group of healthy subjects, the authors claim to have found some clues as to what may be protecting this group of healthy voice-hearers.

"These individuals have a much higher degree of control over the voices. They also have a greater willingness to engage with and view the voices as positive or neutral to their lives," Corlett said. "We predict this population will teach us a lot about the neurobiology, cognitive psychology and eventually treatment of distressing [voices](#)."

Researchers say the approach may be unusual, but is justified by lack of progress in treating illnesses like schizophrenia.

"Our understanding of psychosis is limited, and

we've made only incremental progress for the past 50 years," Corlett said. "The research may be unusual, but big, intractable problems require creative and sometimes unorthodox solutions."

Provided by Yale University

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