

Hearing Voices, Maslows Hierarchy and Compassion Focused Therapy

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Introduction

In this article I want to show how one particular aspect of mental illness namely auditory hallucinations can prevent the personal growth of patients on every level of Maslows models of hierarchy of needs. The article then argues there is a useful solution for dealing with these fundamental problems which can be done by applying the research on Compassion focused therapy by Professor Paul Gilbert.

Gilberts research includes a number of techniques which can be useful for enabling patients to climb Maslows pyramid, the most important of which is developing a compassionate self image. Compassion is a soothing and strengthening quality which is increasingly being used for a range of mental health problems including auditory hallucinations. This compassionate mind training is also supplemented by a number of other things including utilising the minds various drive systems of emotions and drive and expanding these relative to threat, by focusing on objects so as to help reopen the frontal lobes shut down by fear and through the calming influence of relaxation exercises such as safe place imagery and breathing.

Methodology

This personal account of climbing the Maslow tree with a mental illness is based on my own experiences of both hearing voices and the application of compassionate mind training in the clinical process. It also draws on my personal experiences of how this process of ascension has been aided by the various parts of the mental health system. As a personal account it does not make reference to academic procedure. For psychotherapists dealing with compassion focused treatments a more holistic approach to treating schizophrenia focusing not just on soothing symptoms but in terms of how using compassion allows self growth to aid the soothing process. For example the article shows how compassion allows us to cope with criticism from voices but being stronger on the emotional level of the maslow tree can help with this too. Other key examples included are that emotional abuse from voices can be soothed but opening up the emotional tier of the maslow tree can generate positive emotions to help with this. Both examples include overcome the fear caused by schizophrenia at level too to allows the the help the maslow perspective can bring at the higher levels.

It might be objected that we can soothe all three of the middle tiers at once but in the long process of battling with schizophrenia using compassion to battle all three middle levels affected by voices doing each level at a time could speed the process up.

The impact of Voices on the Maslow Tree

To begin this effect is best outlined stages by stage.

Level 1

I heard the neighbours banging on the walls and so ran out of the house. I was wandering round the country side at night, even through blizzards and trying to sleep even on open moorland to get away from the banging noise which followed me everywhere. I could properly look after myself and lost a lot of weight and sleeping only when I was worn out by nerves. All of this was compromising my safety and preventing

the development of third tier emotional strength to deal with the trauma and fight what was happening.

Level 2

Similar to delusions, voices can be frightening and make us feel unsafe. This can either be through what they say or simply by the fact that we hear them. I have heard of patients hearing the voice of god and the devil or as in my case loud roaring noises that were terrifying. Although I was safe once in hospital, I felt the full force of my schizophrenia. When warmth, water and shelter were provided for, fear increased. At this time I looked emaciated and had sunken hollows in my cheeks. Being unable to eat and sleep safety through fear compromised my level one needs again.

Level 3

Voices can be emotionally abusive and cause severe emotional pain. This disturbed emotional state – prevents development of friends and relationships and can also prevent development of a higher self, as Susan Jeffers calls it, when we are loving and powerful. Exhaustion from threat results in no energy or drive and prevents climbing to the esteem tier and voices can make it difficult to trust people that may previously have acted as a source of strength. All this is in turn hindering access to the esteem tier.

Level 4

Hearing voices all the time makes it difficult to concentrate and this might interfere with doing a job. This fact is particularly important because as Neff found self-esteem (maslows fourth tier) is tied to career success and this is reflected more widely with capitalist culture and society. Also to get to this level where the drive system contributes to acquiring esteem as in my case the voices try to undermine my achievements. They will concentrate on our weaker areas and abilities and undermine our self confidence. Again this is a debilitating and undermines the self confidence needed for drive and progress on the esteem tier. Critical voices pick on some of our faults and criticize constantly until we come to believe we are worthless, which can also be emotionally traumatic. This might refer the person back to the emotional tier and help keep them there until esteem needs are answered, where the possibility of suicide has been avoided. Often learned submissiveness in child hood leads in turn to submissiveness to other people in general and later to auditory hallucinations. This provides a further obstacle and needs compassion for soothing or esteem.

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Level 5

As I have argued elsewhere achieving 'self actualisation' requires us to find our inner core and inner voice. These can help by using the core to challenge what the voices think of us and from there to help get us to the top of the pyramid.

The Three Drive Systems

We can now proceed to Professor Paul Gilbert again who writes that one way of dealing with threat is to expand the emotional and drive element of our lives in comparison to threats. To do this the three motivation systems can sometimes be considered in turn rather than together. This works as follows:

(a) **Threat:** We must challenge the voices in the threat circle with positive maxims, less submissiveness and empowering compassion before we can develop emotions. I think some direct confrontation with the symptoms can also be done by overcoming the fear they involve. The key is to address the fears expressed by the voices and not to collude with the fears by avoidance.

(b) **Drive:** hearing voices can be exhausting emotionally and we need to build strength in coping with them here through maxims and compassion together before we will have the energy to pursue goals. When I am motivated to do something eg write papers for publication, then it is often driven by fears that I am not living a useful life. The criticism of the voices can motivate me. However any pleasure or relief from success is brief. We need training to reinforce our accomplishments before the drive circle can be expanded (voices can undermine our confidence and achievements) and as we shall see this requires some positive reinforcement from the therapist and the mental health system.

(c) **Soothing:** Emotional family ties to overcome abuse from voices seem the most powerful response but might not always be available through stigma, distance or demands on time. Day centers can help with this. It also helps to build trust in a therapist. The therapist may be able to calm the voices and my fear of them enough to allow space for my own compassionate core to emerge. The concepts of growth have important similar outcomes: A higher self voice as Susan Jeffers calls it can give us the confidence needed for drive. We won't be afraid of any career challenges and feel powerful enough to take them on. A compassionate positively reinforced sense of self can give us the strength and confidence needed for drive and in developing compassion we are growing as people. A self actualised self can focus on external goal which is useful for achieving drive and success. Let us now apply these models to hearing voices.

Compassion Focused Therapy

It is now necessary to gain some measure how compassion can be important for a person's growth needs.

TIER 1 (food, shelter, rest): When in Sheltered Accommodation it is necessary to have someone to prompt us to eat, wash and look after their room and other needs. Compassion gives us the strength to look after ourselves here.

TEIR 2 (safety): When in hospital because my first tier needs including warmth, water and shelter were provided for along with sleeping tablets I then began to experience the fear more (tier two of safety). I was more aware of my safety needs but still could not eat properly all of the time and still looking emaciated.

Compassion soothes the fear but in my case it was also useful to

challenge fear through graded exposure and positive reinforcement. Compassion gives me the courage and motivation to face my fears.

TIER3 (belonging): Compassion soothes the emotional abuse from the voices and allows connectedness with other people and aids forming relationships. Demonstrating care to others and being able to able to accept car and companionship is crucial here. Compassionate reinforcement has helped me stand up to the voices here. I cannot now always believe what they say. I don't always submit so easily.

Torment from past emotional trauma is in the content of my voices. In particular remembering this trauma for Gilbert does not mean for example that we are unlovable and can also be soothed by compassion and hopefully diminish the effects of this on daily life. A higher "loving self-voice" means as Susan Jeffers describes it means that we can develop emotionally as well as just overcoming fear and should be a useful step into and should facilitate progress on Maslow's emotional tier.

TIER 4 (esteem): Criticism from voices can undermine our confidence in dealing with people in society and with meeting our personal goals needed for esteem. This then stops progression to level five.

If we act like we have confidence then we will eventually begin to believe that we are confident. This is something Susan Jeffers found and confidence classes are taught to this effect at my local day centre. My esteem can be based precariously on what I achieve It can be based on 'if I might make up for my sins then I might survive.' However compassionate self worth is more about intrinsic value. That I am of value regardless of how many papers I write.

TIER 5 ('Self actualisation'): Requires us to find our inner core and inner voice which might be obscured by what the voices think of us but if found can resist the influence of the hallucinations.

We have methods of how to get to and grow this inner core relevant to voice hearing denoting by developing our 'self actualising' and by a 'compassionate self-image'. We will return to this below but I now wish to illustrate all these points by my own experiences.

My Story with Voices

In my case my problems began with my physiological and safety needs together: when hearing a banging noise which seemed to be trying to play on my nerves. The more I heard the noise the more frightened I became. Why was this happening? I thought the neighbours were trying to persecute me and I became so frightened I ran out of the house to get away. Eventually as my absences were being noticed by my friends and family and I was sectioned and taken to hospital. When in hospital my first tier needs including warmth, water, sleeping tablets and shelter were provided for and then I began to experience the fear more. In my case I was still thinking I was responsible of 9/11 and hearing voices talking about this. Being sectioned in hospital made the fear worse. I was more aware of my safety needs but still could not always eat properly and at times looking more emaciated.

Then symptoms began to change and I was afraid to leave the house at all and even locked in a room for two years to escape people. Again this focused my mind on the voices more. It was now useful for me to confront the threat and a support worker was put in place to help getting out and about. This was done by what Susan Jeffers describes as 'feel the fear and do it anyway'. What was needed for this is what Jeffers call a higher self which is powerful enough to overcome the fear. She recommends repeating to ourselves maxims like I will cope with this and other sorts of positive reinforcement like telling yourself it doesn't

matter what the problem is you can still overcome it. For me though this only worked at milder levels of anxiety but she does have a good point: if we truly believe in our hearts that we can do something then you can achieve anything. Voices in turn can criticise and undermine our confidence in doing this and I needed having a support worker on hand is to reaffirm the maxim like, such as, in my case "your doing great." This proved to be very powerful and persuasive but I had to be careful not to become dependent on the support provided.

Overcoming my safety tier here allowed progression to both the emotional and esteem levels. As I have had said being confident in the title of Susan Jeffers book influences how we deal with people in general and also helps access Maslows emotional tier and the drive needs at the fourth esteem tier. Here again what Susan Jeffers says that is if we act like we have confidence in contact with others then we will eventually begin to believe that we are confident. If there is learned submissiveness though in childhood there may be little resistance to what other people think about us, including what the voices say, and we may need to develop new strength which may be lacking. Next taking a confidence class at day centred can be done with a group of people who are in the same position and who can help and support one another in learning this. We learn that we are not the only person in the world who lacks confidence and, as far as the drive circle and esteem tier are concerned, such classes are achievements in themselves. As we grow, as at the emotional tier, as I said, my personal relationships in both friend and family have been instrumental here and the suffering inflicted by the voices has brought us closer together. The strength I have got through their emotional support has helped in particular to overcome the emotional abuse from the voices.

"Hearing voices" though did not at first sound innocuous to my family and it may mean we do loose emotional contact through stigma. So the problem arises that to climb the third level of Maslows tree here some social contact through day centres must be attempted. At the esteem level my success at day centres has overcome the criticism of the voices about my academic abilities and I can counter-pose what the voices think by watching myself learning in class. This added to my confidence in developing drive and this worked best for me because the teachers so constituted a peer group and I think it is important for such tutors to realize there role here.

Often we are so worn out with the fear caused by voices we do not have the strength or concentration to do these classes. By compassionately sharing our experiences, through positive self affirmation, we will eventually be lead to coping with courses. Importantly there is an

obstacle to all this here in developing the emotional and esteem tiers because the only real way of dealing with the voices is to develop 'higher self.' One problem for me here is that a loser and a never psychology will not allow itself to develop such a "higher self" and the attempt to change such a person runs up against the barrier that developing this is just as frightening as the voice. The answer is that the confident higher self part of us also has a voice that can protect and strengthen us and is one real way in which we will stand up to the hallucinations or as in my case overcoming safety needs when out and about. At the fifth tier attention is drawn to threats this stops is being creative as at day centres and I think my voices have some relevant impact here because they keep me focused on my delusions with causing 9/11 and this definitely threatening and seems to need a lot of my attention and analysing its implications even if my safety and other needs are satisfied.

Conclusion

We are learning to connect to our emotional side and learning what it is that gives us self esteem. More than this we are develops new emotions like compassion and becoming connected with ourselves and other people in the society at large. We are beginning to believe in our abilities and making friends. We are growing as people.

There are three lines of thought that are relevant to this sense of self and concepts about of outcomes our self-identity; The 'compassionate self' of Gilbert is a source of strength and as we begin to tackle our more frightening thoughts and voices we can climb the maslow pyramid in new ways. The 'self actualisation' of Maslow finds our inner core and overcomes the violated identity from the voices criticism.

What is happening is that our sense of self is getting stronger and stronger and this should aid in finding our own compassionate voice which can then overcome the hallucinations and their molding of our identity.

This should in turn aid in finding our own compassionate inner voice and compassionate inner core which can then prevent the hallucinations and stop their moulding of our sense of who we are. Once we have got to this point we know the illness cannot return. We will learn to speak out for ourselves against the voice and with confidence, esteem and emotion and this new find independence should become to the goal for service users of the mental health system and lead to life outside of it. If we do not aim at level 5 needs for patients then we are selling them short of what is best for them within the mental health system and not living up to the ideal of patient care that is possible with compassion and more positive thinking.