



**Sitting through it with the voices: Victoria's story**  
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Victoria, person with insider knowledge about living with voices

I first met Victoria in early 2010 when she was in her early twenties and I had recently graduated as a psychologist and had only worked at Aalborg University Hospital for about a year and a half. At that time I neither knew who this young woman was nor what was going on in her life. It would be some years before she would initiate me into some of her history and knowledges. However, I do clearly recall that first meeting with her and it often comes to mind when I think of all that she has taught me since then. When we first met, my task was to administer a number of psychological tests to assess for any cognitive deficits. I no longer remember much about those tests, but I remember this young woman, who quickly curled up her legs in the chair and sat awkwardly crouching. I could hardly make her out as her hair obscured and hid her face from my view and her downcast eyes were directed towards her feet. She was taciturn, replying to my queries with an obligatory yes or no. I completed my task and duly wrote my report. Four years later in the summer of 2014, I met her once again, this time with a different purpose.

She had asked to speak to a psychologist, and that happened to be me. On this occasion, she did not curl up in her chair though, and was far more resolute and had a great deal to say. I asked if there was anything in particular that she wanted to discuss with a psychologist, and she mentioned several possibilities. As she listed one possibility after another, she informed me in a very matter of fact manner that "there are these voices that I hear but I've got that under control, so we need not talk about that". What we did go on to talk about was her desire to be more influential in her own life, and how her knowledges were often disqualified by well-meaning others, some of whom were in positions of professional authority. Most often, her knowledges about what was helpful for her and what she knew were disregarded or dismissed as inconsequential. This resulted in her being persuaded or pressured into interventions that she predicted with almost unerring accuracy would fail and simply drain her of precious strength.

Another matter soon rose to become the centre of our concerns, however: Anorexia. Anorexia had previously made a very serious attempt on her life, including her being hospitalized. Over this period of time, she was so weakened by Anorexia progressively reducing the amount of nourishment she was allowed that she was finally unable to stand without fainting. Thankfully, she survived this, went on to find a way to deal with Anorexia that restored her strength and kept her from death's door. In fact, she had discovered her own way of dealing with Anorexia. However, once again, Anorexia was making another attempt at taking control over her life.





We focussed our conversations on exposing Anorexia's techniques of power, its true agenda, the history of its entrance onto the scene of Victoria's life when she was twelve years old, and what deceitful promises it made in return for its regime of starvation. We recovered Victoria's strategies of reducing Anorexia's power and we exposed the promises it had made to her but failed to keep. We discovered the limits of Anorexia's power, and how Victoria would get around the full force of it, and at times even enjoy significant freedom. After collaborating for about a year, Victoria had established a way of living that revolved around joy, happiness and pleasure, supported by a small community of significant people in her life. This well and truly overshadowed Anorexia and instead Victoria's wishes for her own life became centre stage. And so it has remained up until this day.<sup>6</sup>

At a point in our conversations, when we were quite confident that an Anorexic take-over was no longer an imminent threat given its presence had been substantially weakened, I became curious about a recollection I had of her mentioning hearing voices "but I have that under control". Why was I so intrigued? In the time between 2008 to the present that I have worked at the psychiatric hospital, I have spoken to a number of people who hear voices, and tried to assist them in finding ways of dealing with terrorizing and bullying voices. Had Victoria found a way to deal with such voices, I wondered? And if so, would she perhaps let me in on how she achieved this? I was entirely unprepared for what she would divulge to me. To this day, I feel very fortunate and grateful that she decided to share her knowledges with me.

#### Sitting through it with the voices

CHRISTOFFER: Some time ago, you mentioned to me that you have a way of dealing with the voices you hear, but then it was not relevant for us to talk about that. We had other more pressing concerns. But I have become curious about how you deal with these voices. I speak to other people who are troubled by unpleasant voices. Perhaps your knowledge might be of some use to me and to other people with whom I collaborate. Might I ask you to tell me about this way of dealing with voices that you have?

VICTORIA: The voices wanted me to harm myself. But when I did, it just made the situation worse and led to guilt and self-blame. The voices' primary method of getting me to harm myself was making threats that if I did not comply, then something would happen to the people I love.

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<sup>6</sup> Anorexia has a history of its own in Victoria's life. This, as well as how she went about dealing with Anorexia, is a story of worth in its own right. However, we have decided to focus on Victoria's practice with the voices in this paper. We would like to refer readers who, for whatever reason, are interested in resisting Anorexia to the book *Biting the Hand That Starves You: Inspiring Resistance to Anorexia/Bulimia* by Maisel, Epston & Borden (2004). See the reading list at the end of this paper.





I learned to sit through it, even though the voices said that horrible things would happen to those I care about. I just sat and listened to them for hours without doing anything. In this way, I discovered that it wasn't dangerous to decline doing what the voices demanded. Eventually the voices would stop, although I did not comply. This led me to the conclusion that the voices were making empty threats. The more I endured this, the more the fears associated with the voices diminished.

**CHRISTOFFER:** How were you able to sit through this when the voices were making threats against people you care about? That sounds difficult and scary.

**VICTORIA:** It took courage. It was also because of stubbornness or persistence. And there was a reason why I couldn't just do what they wanted. Because that would have consequences for others – people that mattered to me. Hurting myself or dying would hurt them as well. Being in the company of other people also contributed to being able to sit through it. It would sometimes happen while I was sitting on the couch with visitors, and I would sit through it with them present.

It was really hard! The voices were loud and I was frightened. But it was necessary to stick with sitting through it, and not give in to the voices' demands. I thought to myself: 'If I want to get better, I can't keep hurting myself. I don't want to be like this for the rest of my life.

But I was afraid my parents would die. That was what the voices were threatening. I called them to hear if they were okay without telling them that was why I called. I made up an excuse. Sitting through it involved guilt when I declined to comply with the voices. I felt guilty because what if something happened to someone because I didn't comply? I told the people the voices were threatening about that I was going through all this – that I was being threatened. They said to me that nothing would happen and that they were not afraid of the threats. It meant a lot to me that the people I was being threatened about said this to me. That those people themselves said they were not afraid. This had far more significance than when professionals said something similar.

I made my decision to put my trust in what the people I care about said to me. The fact that they were unafraid supported me in what I was doing. I could see that I had to choose between running a risk for others by not complying despite the threats and risking my own life. If I did not resist the voices' demands, I believed I would end up dead. Because my death was what the voices were beginning to demand of me. When I looked at what the voices desired for my





life - to harm myself and take my own life, I could see that my family wanted better things for me than the voices. This helped me to defy the voices and put my faith in the people I care about. Even though I was frightened and felt guilty.

CHRISTOFFER: What did this lead to? What happened as you practiced this approach to the voices?

VICTORIA: Before the voices were there almost constantly. Now it is only during stress or when I am tired. Their presence is more like background noise now.

I began to be able to see through the voices after I discovered that nothing bad happened even though I declined to comply with the voices. It became easier and easier. The voices became more neutral. I became aware of an association: when I stopped being afraid, the voices became less severe. But when I was stressed, they intensified.

CHRISTOFFER: I am amazed by this, Victoria! Please help me to understand the magnitude of what you were up against: when the voices were making threats to you that people you love will die if you do not do as they say, how convincing were these threats? Did you believe one hundred percent that people could in fact die from your disobedience?

VICTORIA: At first, the voices were absolutely convincing. One hundred percent. I believed what they said more than I believed what anyone else said. This was because of how intense they were and the way that they argued in their favour – it made sense to me. It was not helpful when other people said the voices weren't real. Gaining my own knowledge from personal experience was crucial. Only then was I able to believe what others said.

I was amazed hearing this summary of how Victoria had developed a practice of sitting through it with the voices despite their terrifying threats. How on Earth does she do this? Under what conditions did this happen? I am grateful to Victoria that she agreed to initiate me into this hard won knowledge that she had indeed discovered by means of her own experience and turned into a practice based on her know how.

### The history of the discovery

As mentioned above, Anorexia has been present in Victoria's life from the age of twelve. Practices of self-harm, such as cutting, also came into Victoria's life at around the same time. Victoria first began hearing voices when she was seventeen years old. The first voice did not make threats but variously commented about her activities during the day. She survived a very serious attempt on her life from Anorexia and was consequently hospitalized when she was





nineteen. At around twenty years of age, new voices arrived and started making threats. Victoria is uncertain as to why these new voices got involved within her life. At around the same time, she was trapped in a violent relationship, which she speculates may be relevant to it, but is uncertain about that.

In the twenty-sixth year of her life, she decided against taking antipsychotic medication after nine years of this medical regime. She consequently developed her practice of sitting through it with the voices. It was just a few weeks after she had successfully changed her relationship with the voices and no longer practiced self-harm that our conversations began in the summer of 2014, when I mentioned in the above that she told me that the voices were not a relevant topic for our conversations. I was unaware of such an accomplishment at the time. She has fiercely held to her decision to not receive any further psychiatric medication ever since trusting in her hard won knowledges. Today, the voices are hardly present in her life, and self-harm, which she practiced from the age of twelve until twenty-six, has no place whatsoever in her life.

Asking her about her experiences with antipsychotic medication, Victoria explained that she was prescribed antipsychotics from the age of seventeen. Initially, she did not tell anyone about the voices but she did take antipsychotic medication, which had been originally prescribed for her to help her sleep. Antipsychotic treatment continued when she revealed that some voices were speaking to her in her early twenties. She accepted this, hoping that it would stop the voices. However, this did not prove to be very helpful. The voices carried on regardless. In fact, this medication had deleterious effects. It kept her from doing the things that have always been significant to the living of her life: reading books, sketching, watching movies, and playing a musical instrument. All of these past-times were impossible for her to undertake when she received such medication. The psychiatrists explained to her that it was her illness that made her unable to sketch and read and so on. They didn't think it had to do with the medication. But for Victoria:

*The idea that the illness was to blame gave me a bleak view of the future, because then there was nothing I could do about it. That idea of it did not help me. It made me powerless.*

According to Victoria, the psychiatrists believed that nothing more could be done, and they prognosticated that the circumstances of her life would remain as such for the rest of her life. This gave her the impression that they had more or less given up on her:

*I could see that the medication didn't help and that there was no change in things. It was just the same and more of the same. The psychiatrists were in charge of what went on. The future was bleak. I couldn't do anything, nor feel anything. It was like hitting the same wall over and over again. It wasn't a life for me.*





After having been on antipsychotic medication for nine years and having tried to engage a psychiatrist for over a year in assisting her to discontinue with no luck, in desperation, she decided to stop taking the medication on her own volition and against the psychiatrists' recommendations:<sup>7</sup>

*I stuck with my decision even though I was continuously encouraged every time I was in contact with a psychiatrist to take medication again. But I refused.*

Instead, she began to deal with the voices without medication and using her own tactics. Thus, Victoria "got the power back". Discontinuing antipsychotics also revealed something to her: it had indeed been medication that made her unable to read, sketch and play music, because these skills immediately returned. By this means, she recuperated her talent for, and the pleasure she took in, sketching, reading and playing music.

*The medicine basically made me more vulnerable to the voices and it didn't make them go away.*

This was by no means an easy feat! However, Victoria had reached the conclusion that things had to change. As we shall see, the voices wanted more and more from her. It became clear that doing what the voices wanted would effectively lead to her death. On the other hand, following the treatment program had led to her powerlessness and a very bleak view of the future, a life she considered intolerable. For these reasons, she reached the conclusion to do things her own way despite the dissenting authority of a psychiatric hospital and professional knowledge. In addition, almost everyone around her encouraged her to accept this knowledge and authority, including those close to her.

It was under these dire circumstances that Victoria began to develop a way to live with hearing voices on her own and without medication. To understand in depth just what kind of situation this was and how desperate her search for a different approach was, some appreciation of the nature of the voices and their impact on Victoria's life is necessary.

### The voices

Voices appeared in Victoria's life when she was a seventeen year old high school student. At first, what she heard was the sound of someone reading the daily news. She couldn't make it out in much detail. It was similar to trying to hear what one specific person is saying in a

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<sup>7</sup> Neither Victoria nor I recommend that anyone discontinue antipsychotics, or any other psychiatric medication, on one's own. For many people, antipsychotic medication is helpful and sometimes essential to their wellbeing. In cases, like Victoria's were the benefits of medication seem unclear or deleterious effects are experienced, we strongly encourage discussing this with a psychiatrist and only making careful and slow changes in collaboration with professionals and closely monitored. Both Victoria and I would like to emphasize this point very strongly.





crowded room. This voice did not directly address Victoria. A second voice appeared less than a year after Victoria had been discharged from hospital, an admission consequent on Anorexia's starvation of her. This voice appeared pretty much from one day to the next, differing considerably from the indistinct newsreader. Whereas the newsreader had been mumbling in the background, this second voice spoke clearly and directly to her. It started to comment on everything Victoria did. Soon after, a third voice added itself to the ranks, and this one was very aggressive. These two more recent voices were very dominant and exerted a powerful presence so that although the first voice remained, it no longer attracted much of Victoria's attention relative to the others.

The second voice did a running commentary of sorts. It commented on all sorts of things that Victoria did, such as making a sandwich or watching television. But it would do so in a way that was subtly critical of her. It was perhaps even passive-aggressive towards her. It might pose rhetorical and insinuating questions such as: "Are you just sitting there watching television again?" As time passed, it increasingly expressed its opinions more and more which began to interfere with what she was doing. It became obvious that this voice did not agree with many things in how Victoria lived her life, and wanted to take over supervision of her life even to intimate details.

Eventually it began to warn her against things or suggest what she should do, and then it would get angry with her if she did not act accordingly. It would then blame and demean her for just about everything. It would present itself as being on her side and having her best interests in mind, much like an advisor. This made it quite persuasive especially in situations about which Victoria was confused or uncertain. The voice would then direct her and ostensibly relieve her from any of her doubts and insecurities. It would also direct her attention to people she was with, both those familiar to her and strangers in the street, warning her about them on the pretence of looking out for her safety. Reflecting on this more recently, Victoria commented that:

*It wasn't the aggressive one that was the most dangerous. It was the one giving directions and advice because it was two-faced. It gave the impression of being one thing but in reality it wanted something entirely different for me.*

The aggressive third voice entirely lacked subtlety. When it was present, it would constantly yell at her threatening, "Do as I say or suffer the consequences and then it will be your own fault." What did it want her to do? It required Victoria to physically either hurt or kill herself. It would violently scream such orders at her at any time and on a bad day more than a hundred times! It would vary the details of what it required but the message was always essentially the same. It was relative to this that the critical voice seemed to be on her side. It would advise her to do what the aggressive voice said in order to protect her loved ones. It would give her advice about how to avoid disasters happening that were caused by Victoria's very existence.





Both of these voices agreed that if Victoria did not obey these orders, then loved ones would die as a consequence. In fact, the seemingly friendly voice would explain to her that if she did not hurt herself, then that amounted to making a conscious decision to kill those whom she loved! This made the second voice appear to be loyal to her at the same time as looking out for the people she cared about and loved. The effect was to persuade her to hurt herself, even to the point of risking her own life. If she questioned this or refused, the second voice would also become angry and demeaning of her, while blaming her for putting others at risk. Effectively, these two voices promoted the very same agenda for her life: Getting her to hurt herself through threats of harm to her loved ones and more generally blaming her for bad things happening in the world including disasters happening across the world that she saw on television.

How were they able to persuade Victoria that bad things would happen if she did not follow their directions? They were able to do so, because they took advantage of something in her life:

*There was an understanding from my side that some things would happen and that I was somehow involved in it. There was something wrong in the fact that I was here and that I could control these things by doing what I was told. Then terrible things wouldn't happen. I think I also had an idea of myself at that time that it was wrong that I was here, and that because of that, things would happen.*

*It is difficult to explain in hindsight. I have sometimes read some things I wrote down back then and it doesn't make sense to me now, but back then I was one hundred percent convinced that I should have been dead at a certain point and that because I wasn't dead, there had been a mess in some kind of system. And then the longer I was actually here and didn't do these things I was told, then something terrible would happen to some other people.*

Victoria explained to me that this sense of something having gone awry because of her continued existence had first appeared soon after Anorexia required her hospitalization and subsequent discharge:

*It was this sense that something was wrong with me. I felt physically changed and different after the discharge from hospital. Like something had gone awry at a high level. I should not be here. I should be dead. The body itself felt wrong and looked wrong in the details when I looked in the mirror.*

She was overwhelmed by a very powerful sense that she should in fact have starved to death and that her survival had been a mistake, and that this had created an imbalance in the world. This put other people's lives at risk and made it necessary for her to follow the voices' instructions to compensate. Such an understanding of her continued existence being a mistake







was not created by the voices. It was, however, an understanding that they consistently exploited. Much of what the voices said was connected to this and got its power from it. In this way, the voices' demands made sense to Victoria and seemed right as well.

*I felt an enormous guilt. I felt I was a bad human being because I had put others in peril by being here when I shouldn't be. I put other people in peril and as a normal human being, you think that is wrong, right?*

The voices increased their demands over time. What became required of Victoria to do to keep innocent people and her loved ones safe became more violent. It intensified to the point where she could see that if this continued, she would surely and inevitably die. It was only a matter of time. Her death even became what they explicitly demanded of her to save her own family. A nightmarish dilemma!

*The voices were intensely violent to experience. Sometimes I became all desperate and then it just had to be stopped. I would do some pretty extreme things. I was almost willing to do whatever it took to make it stop. Because I couldn't take it anymore.*

#### How to sit through it with the voices

Faced with such powerful tactics of persuasion and manipulation as well as the force of the unerring conviction that one's existence was harmful to others and the necessity of performing life-threatening self-harm to protect loved ones, how does one find a way to keep existing? Victoria was faced with this dilemma: To kill herself to save her loved ones or to survive and expect to face the guilt of having caused their deaths. At the same time, she was facing the bleak future and hopelessness of the existence of someone unable to pursue a meaningful life due to apparently untreatable mental illness. It was under these desperate circumstances that she made the decision to stop taking psychiatric medication against professional advice and instead to rely on her own courage and self-willed perseverance.

What did this practice of sitting through it consist of? Knowing that the levels and kinds of self-harm that the voices were demanding of her were fatal, she began a practice of just sitting and doing nothing. She abstained from harming herself. Unsurprisingly, the voices became enraged and uttered mean and degrading humiliations and insults. Still, she refrained from complying with their commands. The voices screamed at her just like an infuriated antagonist screaming in your face.

*I really just sat there and stared into the air and was restless. Like with shaking legs and that sort of thing because it was difficult to endure it. I wasn't able to concentrate or do other things even though I tried sometimes but it didn't last long. The television was usually on but I couldn't focus on it.*





At first, she persevered like this for hours every day.

CHRISTOFFER: Did you attempt to mentally deal with the threats and degradations by saying something to yourself?

VICTORIA: I didn't say anything to myself. I sat there and struggled against the urge to harm myself. Because I was very tempted to do that. It was hard. Also because I didn't know how long it would carry on for. I knew that if I cut myself then it would become less intense pretty quickly, and so it was hard to continue to endure it when I knew that there was something that would help.

CHRISTOFFER: How did you prevail against that urge or temptation?

VICTORIA: More and more often they would demand that I do things which would kill me and I didn't want that. And it wasn't enough anymore, just cutting myself which had worked before. They were no longer satisfied with that. So I was forced into sitting through it without doing anything, I feel. If I didn't want to die, then I had no other choice.

CHRISTOFFER: I imagine that the idea of doing yourself harm would have pulled at you all the time. How did you stay put despite this?

VICTORIA: I think I was stubborn. I think that played a big part in it. That I was tired of it. I wanted it to stop but I didn't want it to stop by dying. Cutting myself was the only solution I had had for many years. But I also felt a bit like I was stuck for many years because I hadn't found other solutions or ways to handle it because I had a method that worked. Perhaps it wasn't optimal, but at least it was effective. But I didn't want to continue that way. I wanted something else to happen in my life and not to be controlled by self-harm and voices and all that. I couldn't stand the idea that this was how it should be for the rest of my life. And then I got angry and stubborn. When the idea came that I could reduce the intensity by harming myself, then it was this idea that worked against it. I felt that if I didn't find a solution, then I wouldn't live long. So I didn't want to do what the voices ordered me to because I couldn't stand it being this way. It was either finding a solution to it, a way to handle it and be able to stand it, or commit suicide. Those were the two thoughts I had.

I was angry because I didn't feel that the professionals were helping me. I was angry that no one wanted to help me find a different solution. I was angry about a lot of things that had built up over a very, very long time. But I got this devil-may-care mentality. As they had told me that I should take medication for





the rest of my life and that I wouldn't get much better and stuff like that, I got this attitude: 'Dammit! That is not for them to decide!' And I think that was really part of what motivated me. I was angry about what my life had become; angry that I hadn't been able to do the things I dreamed of doing; angry that I wasn't allowed to travel when I wanted to and things like that. There were lots of things. That meant that I would not accept my situation. I wanted something to change. No matter what. It gave me a kind of power that I was angry at everything.

As Victoria began to sit through without doing as the voices demanded, the voices got more and more angry and scolded her, calling her awful things to degrade her. They made threats and got louder. She could focus on nothing else. This was extremely intense for her. The way they degraded her had a powerful impact.

VICTORIA: I believed many of the things they said about me. That I deserved it and all sorts of other stuff.

CHRISTOFFER: Were you successful the first time you tried sitting through it? Or were there attempts to take steps in that direction that weren't quite successful?

VICTORIA: There were times when I didn't manage to sit through it all the way to the end but I don't know if it was the first time I tried. But certainly there were times when it was so overwhelming that I did something anyway but most of the time I found out that it would also stop. That helped. That knowledge. That I had that. That even though it is bad right now, I know that if I don't do anything then it will stop anyway at some point. It doesn't go on and on and on to the same degree at least. It stops.

CHRISTOFFER: How long would it take to sit through it?

VICTORIA: Well, watching television in the evening I could be sitting like that through a whole movie. So a couple of hours.

CHRISTOFFER: How many rounds of doing this did it take before the voices began to lose their credibility?

VICTORIA: I found out that nothing bad happened that would then be my fault. Even though they insisted strongly, it was not true. It took quite a few times to be sure because they seemed highly convincing and I just went around all scared that something might happen at a later time. It could well be that something





bad would happen later. But for every time I did it, it was a little easier. I found that nothing happened. They lied. Hah!

**CHRISTOFFER:** How did the voices take it when you did this? Did they intensify their attempts to make you do what they wanted? Or was it more of the same and keeping it up for a long time? Like a strategy of exhaustion – they just keep it up and keep it up. Or was it more like ‘alright then’, they will go harder on you or make more extreme threats or become even more degrading, yell even louder? How did it unfold during those hours?

**VICTORIA:** They got worse when I didn't do what they said. They got angrier and angrier. They sometimes started out not being too horrible actually, where they just kept saying certain things, and then, when I didn't do what I was told, it got worse and they got angry. They scolded more and said whatever that they could come up with. Then it really went on with pretty much the same thing for a considerable time. Then at some point it dampened down again. It definitely lessened little by little after a certain point. At that time it was unusual for the voices to be completely absent. I heard them almost constantly but they weren't always as intense. So when they were not so bad, then I could do other things or I could get to sleep. I could sort of push them away a bit. Whereas when they were really grinding away I couldn't do anything except just sit down.

**CHRISTOFFER:** How long it was like this before things changed? This new life with periods of sitting through it interrupted by more calm periods – was it a week, a month, six months before there was an overall change?

**VICTORIA:** I would definitely say it was a number of months where it was like that. Then it slowly started getting better. I wasn't as frightened. I stopped being so scared, and then they sort of lost some of their power when I wasn't scared any longer.

**CHRISTOFFER:** Do you suspect that voices like these are dependent on being able to generate fear in some way?

**VICTORIA:** Well, it is like that to the extent that they want to get me to do things. They very much exploited my fear of losing the people I care about and something bad happening. When I found out nothing happened to them and that the voices would eventually stop, then I no longer had the same need to listen to them or to do what they said. So they no longer got anything out of it in the same way. And they might be loud and it might be difficult but I wasn't as afraid. Because of that, I was no longer tempted to do what they said in the same way because I was no longer one hundred percent convinced that





someone would die or things like that. When I did then it was easy to get me to do what they said. But after this, it was no longer easy.

I think I just wanted to win. I had the sense that it was me and it was my life and I would win this. I was fed up with how things were. Really tired of it. I didn't want to give in. The longer I went without doing harm to myself, the more it was also like I mustn't ruin what I had built. I felt it would have been wasted if I went out and cut myself. Then I would have thrown away all that I had fought for.

Actually, I was immensely proud because I was twelve when I started cutting myself and hurting myself in other ways. In those years there were many periods of time, long periods where I did it every day, several times a day. And the fact that I had then gone a month or two, or just a week or three days, that was a gigantic victory for me. After all, it was something that has been such a big part of my life for so many years. I was really proud of it. I had been able to not cut myself when it would usually have been the first thing for me to go to. I was proud that I had gotten to such a place.

#### Additional knowledge and practices

In trying to be of assistance to people who may be positively terrorized by voices, it may be tempting to try to tell them that the voices aren't real and can't do what they claim. I wondered if Victoria had any experience with that or might have any recommendations for me and others trying to help people who hear threatening, degrading and terrorizing voices.

**VICTORIA:** Many people said to me that the voices weren't real and not dangerous but it isn't helpful when people say that. You can't just ignore the voices because they sound absolutely real. At first, I would search for the people that the voices belonged to because there had to be someone.

**CHRISTOFFER:** Have you ever experienced attempts from others to convince you that the voices weren't real?

**VICTORIA:** When professionals tried to convince me that it wasn't real, the effect was that I didn't feel like they were listening to me. It made me feel more alone and not heard. I felt that it wasn't being taken seriously just how awful it was for me to experience. It was impossible for me to see it the way they did. When they said 'but it isn't real, Victoria', the things I was going through were belittled. I was cut off from them so that it was me saying what I experienced and them saying





it wasn't real. That meant I couldn't get to talk to anyone about how it was for me. About all that fear I had.

Victoria found that a different approach to the voices than the one espoused by psychiatric treatment was more helpful for her:

*At a certain point, I accepted that the voices were there and that it was okay that they are there. This is in contrast to the idea that they must be medicated away and that it was a personal defeat when the voices persisted. To live WITH them provides a different focus. To do that is not an impossible task.*

In addition to her practice of sitting through it with the voices, Victoria also made other discoveries that supported her in finding a way to live with voices. She found that her artistic practices that had returned after discontinuing medication were helpful:

VICTORIA: I started talking to the voices. When I do that, they become calmer at other times. So sometimes, I have a kind of conversation with them to myself. Or when I'm in the bathroom, I have a chat with them where other people mostly won't hear. I also discovered that I could distract myself from the voices by reading or sketching. When I play a musical instrument, the voices are not there at all. I participated in a group with others who hear voices. It introduced me to the idea of talking to the voices. The idea of sitting through it was just an idea I got, I think, and doing that was simply a necessity.

CHRISTOFFER: How did you go about talking to the voices? What did you say?

VICTORIA: At first it was often responses to what they were saying. Talking back. I told them when I didn't agree with them and I asked them why they wanted the things they were ordering me to do. 'Why do you want this?' And I would also tell them that 'this is not being fair'. I started setting aside some time to talk with them. I told them about how my day was and what I would like to do. I explained that my reasons for doing something were because I wanted to and that I was allowed to do things my way. Then they would give me their opinion. I made them a part of my daily life by allowing them to be there and chatting with them.

It was a relief to be able to tell them, "Dammit! You must stop this now!" To not just sit there and listen passively but to engage and be part of what was happening. I asked them to explain things and that way it wasn't just an order that I had to obey. They had to explain themselves. This revealed that their explanations and reasons didn't make much sense. I asked questions, even





about the details of their plans. This contributed to becoming less afraid. Most of the time they did not respond to this in a violent way. They would mostly try to persuade me. Talking to the voices like this and taking time for them during the day, they became less intense and aggressive during the rest of the day. This way, I had some control.

She also found that taking a shower was helpful:

*I would also often take showers. It had some sort of calming effect on me. Perhaps it didn't have much effect on the voices but I think it had an effect on the urge to harm myself when I was sitting in the shower with the hot water. That helped a little. I often did that when it was happening. Then I would sit in there on the floor all the while. They would still be loud and insistent and all that, but it helped me to be more relaxed. A little less frightened in some way.*

### The results of this practice

We have tried to get a sense of the time frame of this practice and the changes it led to. Victoria stopped taking antipsychotic medication at the end of 2013. She and I had our first therapy meeting almost exactly six months later in the summer of 2014. This would indicate that Victoria started to sit through it with the voices and had reached a point where speaking with me about the voices was no longer relevant, because *"I have that under control"* within those six months. In other words, Victoria successfully found a way to live with the voices where she was no longer afraid and no longer practiced self-harm, and at the highest estimate, this took no more than six months.

Speaking in the summer of 2017, Victoria said:

VICTORIA: The voices are not there nearly as much now. They are there sometimes but they don't get anything out of it. They are pushed away and then I can do other things. And basically, they can say whatever they want. I don't have to listen to it and I think that is what makes a difference. They don't affect me. I may think it is annoying that they are there but now they don't frighten me. And they are less intense. Today they may come and say I should hurt myself but I don't even consider doing it. It's just something I'm used to. That is what they say and they will probably keep saying that but it doesn't mean anything to me. Before, the voices were there almost constantly. Now it is only during stress or when I am tired. Their presence is more like background noise now.

In the summer three years ago was the last time I hurt myself. It is the longest I have ever gone. So I am happy about that. And I am happy that it isn't even





something I think about anymore. I have actually been able to come to such a place in my life where it doesn't have any space. I would have never believed it. It is not something I think about and it is not something I want to do when I am sad. Even though I go through some tough stuff, this is still not what I think I should do.

Sometimes, if people ask about it and if it is someone I trust, then I will tell them about this and say that has worked for me. This is difficult to understand for people who haven't tried it. People sometimes ask because compared to before, they can see a difference in me. They are curious what it is that has happened, seeing as I have suddenly been able to go from being, well, hardly even being able to talk to people and make eye contact and stuff like that to being what I am today. Many people comment on that. That it is as if I am two different people.

Reflecting on her experiences with finding a way to deal with Anorexia as well as finding a way to live with voices, Victoria states that she has learned that she must trust in her own feelings and not what others say, even if they are an authority.

VICTORIA: If it doesn't feel right, there is probably something in it.

CHRISTOFFER: Was this feeling difficult to find at first?

VICTORIA: I think I have always felt clearly but you have doubts when a whole bunch of professionals say it can't be right. When you are constantly told that the medication helps. But on medication, everything was empty. I was almost nothing.

What happened with Victoria's sense of being physically wrong and her continued existence being a mistake? In late 2017, Victoria commented:

VICTORIA: I do not get that sense at all now. Actually, I hadn't noticed that it has disappeared. I don't know if it happened suddenly or gradually. I hadn't thought about that until now that you ask. I haven't consciously done anything to change it.

CHRISTOFFER: When was the last time you are aware that it was there?

VICTORIA: It has been there within the past four years. Many things changed markedly in various ways when I stopped taking medication. I started feeling a lot better. There was more progress within months than there had previously been in







several years. Maybe as the voices dwindled more and more, they could no longer strengthen the sense of wrongness? They certainly contributed to holding on to it by repeating it constantly.

### Follow up

At the time of writing, autumn 2018, Victoria has passed her four-year anniversary since she last hurt herself. Victoria was last admitted to psychiatric hospitalization in the autumn of 2014 due to stress and insomnia which had made the voices more difficult to deal with. She did not do what the voices wanted, however, and it was a short stay.

Between 2007 and 2014, she was psychiatrically hospitalized nine times. Between 2005 and 2014, she had visits to the emergency room due to self-harm fifteen times.

Victoria still does not use any psychiatric medication.

As stated earlier, in the summer of 2017, her three year anniversary of sitting through it with the voices and putting an end to self-harm, Victoria stated that the voices were now only there when she was stressed or had not slept well. The voices were unable to persuade her to harm herself or even consider it. As of autumn 2018, after her fourth anniversary, Victoria declares that she cannot hear the voices at all anymore. She cannot even sense their presence. As far as she is able to determine, they have completely disappeared. They have been absent for at least one year now.

### Further messages from Victoria

Victoria would like to encourage psychiatrists to listen carefully to psychiatric patients' knowledge and wishes, not least those who are dissatisfied with the effects of antipsychotic medication and to consider the possibility of collaborating with such patients to carefully reduce the dose. She would also like to encourage psychiatric professionals to explore different approaches. She does not encourage anyone to discontinue medication on his or her own like she did, nor does she want to give the impression that discontinuing medication is the right decision for everyone.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to give Victoria my heartfelt thanks for her generosity in sharing her story and knowledges, and for her time and involvement in developing her account into this paper.

Thank you to David Epston for his assistance in developing this account of Victoria's knowledge about voices.

Victoria's family.





### Consent

This is a co-authored paper, written by Victoria and Christoffer in collaboration. It contains accounts of some of our conversations from both of us. Victoria has been involved in editing the text underway. She has had the right to make changes, additions and subtractions from the text, and the final version of the text has been reviewed by her. After having accepted the final text, she has given written consent for it to be published in a journal.

Victoria is a pseudonym to protect her privacy. Details that might reveal her identity have not been included in the text.

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This work took inspiration from the narrative therapy approach called Co-research and Anti-Anorexia/Bulimia

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