



# The Recovery Process Part 5

**(Not for distribution to Self-Help  
Group Members)**

## **Making Sense of Voices: The Relationship between the Voices and Life History (Part B)**

### **Constructs**

Making sense of voices acknowledges the relationship between the voices and traumatic experiences.

**In order to retrieve information about the relationship between the voices and life events the “code” must be broken.**

This code in people hearing voices is often a destructive way of communication and an exaggerated and often negative way of expressing individual emotional problems.

**This systematic but open search for meaning leads to a dynamic psychosocial formulation called a “Construct”.**

The construct is the result of information gathered in an interview. From the interview a report is made. The report is a short summary of the thirteen items from the interview schedule, and is used in discussion with the voice hearer, to ensure that the most important information has been gathered.

The report helps to achieve an overview that the voice hearer can memorise and is a way of avoiding a chaotic collection of information.

From the interview report, 6 areas of information are used to form the construct; They are:

- Identity
- Characteristics
- History of the voices
- Content of the voices
- Triggers
- Childhood history.

**With the construct 2 questions are asked:**

## 1. Who are the people the voices represent?

## 2. What problems do the voices represent?

### Who are the people the voices represent?

Experience has taught us that traumatic events are represented in the voice hearing experience by the other people involved, as well as connected emotions that the person finds difficult to cope with.

In the interview, identity is derived from the identity and characteristics of the voices; many people give their voices names or have voices who give themselves names. Identity can also be derived from other characteristics of each voice, for example, age, sex, metaphorical forms of expression.

Other connecting characteristics might be the way the voice speaks to the person; commanding, critical, helpful. The idea behind establishing this information is to get a picture of the people who might have been involved in the trauma or time of stress, or who have been helpful in difficult times.

### What problems do the voices represent?

This question is directed to the circumstances or events at the root of the voice-hearing experience. It is important to identify the time of onset as part of the history of the voice-hearing experience.

A chronology needs to be established: when the person first started to hear voices; when more voices came; if and when voices changed character. This chronology links the circumstances surrounding the voice-hearing experience and should make it possible to identify the root cause.

**History, Content, Triggers** – are important for analysing the problems that the person has experienced in their life and for indicating which of these problems the voices represent.

Finally, **“Childhood History”** is important in detecting the traumatic experiences that have made the person vulnerable to hearing voices.

**The identity, content, characteristics of the voices and their history of origin might indicate whom they represent, whilst the history, content and triggers might show what problems they represent. Sometimes collaborative imagination is needed in order to find the “who” behind the voices.**

## **Example of a Construct**

Jolanda is 30 years old and hears 3 voices.

### **The identity of the voices**

*They all have a name: Nina, Eva and Hannah.*

### **The characteristics of the voices**

*Nina is 7 years old, cries a lot or shouts if Jolanda doesn't listen to her. Eva is 19, thinks Jolanda worthless, and is aggressive towards her most of the time. Hannah is the same age as Jolanda and is a positive and helpful voice.*

### **The history of the voices**

*Nina came when Jolanda was 7 years old. This was when the sexual abuse by an uncle started. It lasted until she was 12. Eva showed up when Jolanda was 19. At that age Jolanda wanted her parents to help her to officially accuse the uncle and bring him to trial. Just before the formal court hearing the parents withdrew the charge and then the voice of Eva came. Hannah entered the scene when Jolanda had therapy; this helps Jolanda to cope with the other voices.*

### **The content of the voices**

*Nina wants to tell Jolanda what happened when she was abused and will cry or shout if Jolanda doesn't listen to her. Eva accuses Jolanda of being weak and of not being assertive enough in defending herself against others. Eva bullies Jolanda and tells her to kill herself for being "such a wimp". Hannah gives advice, for example, not to listen to the other voices and to look for something that distracts her.*

### **Triggers**

*For Nina, triggers are visits to the Jolanda's parents, when talk turns to family matters and there are confrontations about sexuality in her life. Triggers for Eva are when Jolanda should make a stand but is afraid of doing so, and often when Jolanda visits her family or comes into contact with men, because Eva doesn't want her to relate to men. Hannah comes when the other voices, especially Eva, are aggressive and when Jolanda is afraid of them or contemplates doing what Eva tells her to do.*

### **Childhood history**

*Jolanda had a much protected upbringing where she didn't learn how to stand up for herself and her anger was rejected.*

## The Construct

*Who do the voices represent? The voices Nina and Eva don't represent real people but Jolanda's emotions in relation to the sexual abuse. Hannah represents Jolanda herself.*

*What problems to the voices represent? Jolanda agrees that all the information points to her difficulties with coping with the sexual abuse in her past. She agrees with the construct. The voice of Nina represents her emotional reactions to the abuse, and later, her anger with her family who seemed to prefer her as a patient rather than the victim. The relationship with the life history allowed her to change her relationship with her voices, but this was not an easy process. Jolanda started to develop herself. She embarked on a course of education and has become the proud mother of a son. She has found her way to recover.*

## Breaking the code

*Breaking the code is not the individual activity of the professional but the collaboration between the voice hearer and the professional, or even between the voice hearer and a group when the construct is conducted in a group. In such a group, other voice hearers and professionals generate associations that can be very relevant for the individual in understanding the meaning of their voices. Experienced voice hearers can be of great support and act as professional helpers.*

## Summary

*There is a relationship between the voice and the life history and the way people are able to cope with their voices. Voice hearers describe several elements that are indicative of this relationship: identity, characteristics, history, triggers, content, and childhood.*

*Together, these elements make sense of the voices for the voice hearer and for others involved with the voice hearer, such as family, partner and therapist.*

**(Reference: The content and quotes included in this document were extracted from the book – ‘Living with Voices – 50 Stories of Recovery,’ by Romme, Escher, Dillon, Morris & Corstens.)**

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