

“Not all light is good. There is negative light, that can cast bad shadows.”

— *Anthony Riccione*

Understanding Hallucinations

Objective: To gain a sense of mastery over your hallucinations by learning how to test reality and by recording your triggers and responses to them.

You Should Know

There might be a point in your life after a trauma when your sensory ego (the parts of yourself that experience all the senses) is confused and disoriented, as if you are driving a car while hitting the gas and brakes at the same time. You might have nightmares and appetite problems, your memory might play tricks on you, and you can't trust your perception. You can't trust nor control your feelings and you don't understand your motivation. Your communication style is ineffective and your behavior is impulsive. On top of everything, your identity is confused: Who are you? You are at a turning point.

So, you see something that other people don't see. So, you see something that doesn't exist. But, you see it. You are having a hallucination.

A hallucination is a false sensory perception occurring in the absence of external stimuli. It is distinct from an illusion, which is a misperception of an external stimulus. In either case, your mind is playing tricks on you. It can happen through any sense modality: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch; or internal stimuli, e.g., your stomach, spine, head. The crucial point is that you believe the perceptions are real though they are not.

A hallucination has the qualities of a real perception. Hallucinations are vivid, substantial, and are perceived to be located in external objective space. They are distinguishable from several related phenomena, such as dreaming, which does not involve wakefulness; pseudo-hallucinations, which do not mimic real perception, and are accurately perceived as unreal; illusion, which involves distorted or misinterpreted real perception; and imagery, which does not mimic real perception and is under voluntary control.

Hallucinations might be simple, seeing dots running around; or elaborate like a movie. They can be constructed with one sense, for example, visual, or might include various other senses.

Hallucinations can also occur in other ways: proprioceptive (perception of body position), equilibrioceptive (the sense of balance), nociceptive (the sense of pain), thermometer (perception of temperature), conceptive (perception of time), and kinesthetic (movement).

How you perceived the danger at the time of your trauma, what happened, and what you did is crucial. Whether it was you who experienced hallucinations or were close to someone who has, you might be familiar with the fear of going crazy. Fear of going crazy is the second strongest human fear. It's like the death of the personality. Hallucinations can be terrifying. Having a clear

vision of what is real or not real is important for growing out of the trauma. Learning how to form a strong ego (sense of self) and developing rational thinking will help you grow and thrive. Your ego is like a muscle—the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets; the stronger it is, the more you are able to discern what is real and what is not real, and then lessen the fear.

In this worksheet, you will do several activities related to hallucinations, including keeping a hallucination diary to record themes and triggers, and then learning how to reality test.

What to Do

- The first step in treating hallucinations is to see a doctor. Many doctors will recommend taking prescription antipsychotic medication, which can help greatly in many cases. It is also important to ensure effective collaboration with your other relevant service providers.
- Remember that you can learn to make a distinction between a hallucination and other forms of visions, such as illusions, daydreaming, sleeping, fantasizing.
- Ask for help and learn the difference among your experiences. It's not easy, but it is possible.
- Do not respond as if the hallucination is real. Do not act out. Just acknowledge.
- “Reality testing” is a concept in psychoanalytic theory in which the ego recognizes the difference between the external and internal world. In other words, it is the ability to see a situation for what it really is, rather than what one hopes or fears it might be. You can learn to distinguish your internal thoughts, feelings, and ideas from the events, which are based outside your body and mind. Find a psychotherapist to teach you. For example, you can check the reality of a hallucination by using other senses. If you are having a visual hallucination, write down on a piece of paper how you are experiencing this with your ears, your sense of touch, and your sense of smell. By writing your perceptions on a piece of paper, you can create basic data that you can check.
- You have to create a plan with goals, steps, and methods. The first step is to notice: I am hallucinating. I will ground myself. Breathe calmly. Think clearly. Control my emotions, thoughts, and behavior. Then, do the reality check activity:

Reality Check

My name is _____.

I am _____ tall.

I weigh _____.

I am _____ years old.

Today's date is _____.

I live at this address: _____.

My phone is _____.

I love eating _____.

At the moment I am at/in _____.

I am _____ (doing what).

I am with _____.

Have friends prepared to help in your reality test. Compare your reality with theirs.

I see _____, do you see it too?

I hear _____, do you hear it too?

I smell _____, do you smell it too?

I can touch _____, can you touch it too?

- Write down your hallucination and share it with the people you trust. Give it to your doctor.
- Once you feel your ego is stronger, go to your safe place, sit on a chair, and talk to your hallucination; tell it that you do not see or hear what it does. Don't argue with it. Try to understand it. It's OK to talk about your hallucinations. The presence of your therapist or counselor might help.
- Talk with other people who have experienced hallucinations; ask whether there is anything you can do to help in case they are still hallucinating occasionally. You might get some ideas.
- Help the person find ways to handle the hallucinations, such as listening to music or watching TV.
- Do not hurry yourself. Find empathy and trust that you will reorganize your perception.
- Try to understand your hallucination. It could be pure nonsense or it could have some meaning.
- Know your cultural background, myths, and legends; they might be used as symbols in your hallucination.
- Create a routine; structure your day with activities.
- Do something concrete with your hands—pottery, gardening, cooking, and so on.

