

Active Forms of Mindfulness to Refocus Attention from Hallucinations

Hallucinations are perceptual sensory experiences that other people do not share. They can include hearing things that others don't hear, seeing things others don't see, smelling things others don't smell, or feeling tactile sensations when others cannot see the source. These experiences pose the biggest challenges when the individual pays considerable attention to them at the expense of engaging in other meaningful interests or pursuing valued desires.

In Recovery-Oriented Cognitive Therapy (CT-R), we take an active approach to mindfulness to help refocus attention away from these experiences and onto activities that provide connection, purpose, belonging, and other meaningful targets. Active mindfulness can involve movement, interaction in a dyad or group, or hands-on activities (e.g., crafting, videogames). Importantly, the aim is not to simply distract from the hallucination—distraction is often short-lived— but rather to take the energy and attention from one area and put it toward something else. The clinical aims of refocusing include strengthening beliefs about being able to control these experiences and reduce stress and, especially in the case of voices, minimizing the impact of beliefs that the hallucination is credible or powerful. The turn to positive action then provides the opportunity to strengthen beliefs about being capable of connection, enjoyment, or achieving aspirations, among other important beliefs.

One intervention that can be used to kickstart refocusing is called *Look-Point-Name*. It is best done as an interactive exercise where, after attempting to get an initial gauge about the degree of distress a person is experiencing* you go back and forth pointing at objects and naming them aloud (e.g., chair, phone, picture of a dog, mug). You keep going until you can observe that the person is more externally focused, has more energy, has brighter affect and is perhaps even laughing, or is identifying things at a quicker pace. You then help them notice this shift by getting a second rating, or asking: “It seems like you feel less stressed while we’re doing this, did you notice that?” You then draw valuable meanings by asking: “I wonder if feeling less stressed after doing this means you have ways to get control over stress, what do you think?”

Ask individual to rate their stress – or voices, or whatever they call it (low-medium-high; rate 1-10)

Look at an object, **point** to it, and **name** it out loud, then invite the individual to do the same

When to stop

Keep taking turns until you notice the person is engaged, has more energy, and seems less stressed

Rate stress again

(“How’s your stress now, any better?”)

Draw conclusions (“It seems like you feel less stressed while we are doing this, did you notice that?” or “Do you have more or less control?”)

This exercise can be introduced in a very normalized way, such as a silly game, or as something that others have used to feel less stressed – the person does not have to label their experience as a hallucination or as voices for the exercise to be effective. The key at the conclusion of this intervention is to then provide the opportunity for positive action: “Now that we’re feeling less stressed and even more energized and focused, I wonder if this would be a good time to work on that recipe book you wanted to pass down to your kids?” Whatever it is that the person enjoys or that means most to them can be the source for continued momentum!

*Sometimes individuals may be too internally focused to identify a rating, in which case, those who are attempting the intervention may simply begin the game and make observations of improvement when it happens