

Auditory Hallucinations vs. Negative Thinking

For Patients and Families

There are several different things to consider when trying to tell the difference between negative thinking and auditory hallucinations.

Negative thinking is the term used for a thought process in which an individual tends to be critical of themselves or others, finding the worst in everything, or expecting of the worst possible scenarios for any situation. Negative thoughts can be associated with a variety of mental health symptoms including depression, irritability, anxiety, or fear. It's important to point out that the thoughts are "silent". With negative thinking the person recognizes that they are "thinking" and there is no impression that someone is talking to them or saying these things to them. For example, someone might think "I am not a good dancer so I am not even going to try" or "Whenever I tell a joke no one laughs so why should I bother."

Auditory hallucinations are different. They involve a sensory experience in which a person believes that they can hear sounds or a person talking without any actual external sounds happening. For example, they may hear a person's voice when there is no one present; they may even look around to find where the voice is coming from. A person may also experience auditory hallucinations that they believe to be coming from non-human entities such as demons, God, ghosts or even objects such as a piece of furniture. Auditory hallucinations bring with them a powerful sense that they are real.

One way to tell the difference between the person's own thoughts and auditory hallucinations is that the hallucination has the quality of an actual voice – it sounds like a person is talking. A common type of auditory hallucination involves hearing one or more voices talking directly to the person and making comments which can be critical such as "You are stupid" or "Why are you here, you are just a drain on society" or telling the person what to do, such as "Go ahead, eat that rotten food." A rarer experience involves hearing two or more voices commenting on one's behavior, talking about someone in the third person, or conversing with one another. Examples might be "Look at that, now he is eating a sandwich" or "He is driving around in a car, but he's a bad driver" or "Did you see that dumb thing he just did?" "Yes, I did, what an idiot." Although auditory hallucinations do not involve a real sound from the outside world, the experience is often described as real, intense, and frightening by the person who is experiencing them.