

## HVN-USA Charter

### FOR GROUPS THAT ARE MEMBERS OF HEARING VOICES NETWORK USA

*Adapted from the Charter developed by HVN England*

*Revised: September 2020*

The Hearing Voices Network USA (HVN-USA), is one of a growing number of nationally based networks around the world joined by shared goals and values that incorporate a fundamental belief that there are many ways to understand hearing voices, seeing things others do not see, and/or other unusual or commonly misunderstood experiences. It is part of an international collaboration between people who have had these experiences themselves, friends and family members, professional supporters, and other allies to create space to talk openly about voices, visions, and more without the assumption that anyone is sick or has an illness.

HVN-USA supports the development of groups for people having these experiences—and separate groups for their family members and friends—that follow the guidelines offered in the HVN Charter. These groups are spaces of trust, respect, equality, acceptance and mutuality. They affirm that each person has the right to develop their own understanding of their experiences. There is no attempt to persuade, teach, preach, fix or change ideas. Hearing Voices Groups become communities where people can find acceptance, belonging, purpose, and space to explore and learn about one’s self, their experiences and their connections with others and the world.

There are three different kinds of HVN groups. The three different types of groups are:

1. [HVN affiliated groups](#)
2. [HVN full groups](#)
3. [HVN family and friends groups](#)

All types of groups are equally valid and important.

#### **ALL Hearing Voices Groups\* operate within the following guidelines:**

1. We start from a place of acknowledging three freedoms:
  - Freedom to interpret experiences in any way, not just an illness framework.
  - Freedom to challenge social norms-- including gender norms or other ideas about how we are “supposed to be” in the world.
  - Freedom to talk about anything-- not just voices and visions.
1. Groups are not “treatment” or “psychoeducation”. The primary focus is on making connections and sharing experiences.
2. Everyone present is responsible for creating an environment that centers respect, support and empathy

3. There is acceptance that voices and visions, tactile sensations and other unusual or misunderstood experiences are real experiences.
4. There is no assumption that these experiences are always bad, without value, or needing to be stopped.
5. The person having these experiences is in the best position to decide or discover what they mean, and what they want to do about them.
6. Anyone can choose to speak or share in a group, but no one is required to do so. Silently bearing witness to the experiences of others has great value.
7. Everyone present is seen as responsible for holding the values of the group, not just the facilitators.
8. There is no requirement for facilitators to take attendance, keep notes, conduct risk assessments, or report to anyone about what happened in the group.
9. Facilitators are members of the group who also participate and share about their own experiences at least some of the time.
10. Facilitators use open, non-clinical, everyday language, and create space for others to explore what clinical terms mean for them when they come up.
11. There is effort made to honor all voices, including those that members might find harder to hear.
12. Groups are only for people who are attending for their own support. Observers (media, students, providers, and anyone else wanting to come for any reason other than to explore their own experiences) are not able to attend.\*
13. There is no referral or “discharge” process. People come to groups as often and for as long as it works for them, and attendance is always voluntary and self-determined.
14. Everyone present is asked to practice being attentive to and curious about one another, and to not try to speak for each other.
15. Privacy and confidentiality are prioritized, and any limits to privacy are shared upfront.
16. There is recognition that the Hearing Voices Movement is a part of a social justice movement that intersects with other movements and marginalized experiences. People’s experiences with systemic oppression are accepted as real, and there is a commitment on the part of the group to interrupt words or actions rooted in racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, psychiatric oppression and other types of systemic oppression when they come up.
17. Effort is made to insure at least one facilitator has experienced hearing voices, seeing visions, or similar. When that is not possible, effort is consistently made to move in that direction.
18. Effort is made to follow as many of the guidelines from the “full group” category as possible, and there are concrete (rather than arbitrary) reasons why certain guidelines are not being met.\*\*

**Note:** *Affiliated groups are groups that follow the guidelines intended for ALL Hearing Voices groups as listed in this section, but do not fulfill some or all of the requirements listed in other HVN group categories.*

### **Full Groups:**

As stated above, both affiliated and full groups are valid and have value. For example, Hearing Voices groups in hospitals can be extremely important and even life changing, but will never be able to be “full” groups simply because they meet in the hospital. On the other hand, full groups are extremely important in order to create opportunities for people who may not have easy access to or who have been alienated from the mental health system, or who just have never been a part of a system at all. They are also extremely important because they represent a fuller shift of power into the hands of voice hearers, and that in itself can be incredibly important to someone’s healing process. To be considered a full group, groups must follow all the guidelines named above, as well as:

1. Active efforts should be made to prioritize and support the development of group facilitators who have themselves experienced voices, visions, etc. Ultimately, the goal should be to have both facilitators have this experience first-hand.
2. Groups are open to anyone with lived experience, whether or not they use any particular mental health or other services.
3. Groups are open to anyone from any geographical area.
4. Any limits to privacy are decided by the group itself.
5. Responsibility lies with the group (not just the facilitators) when problems arise or decisions need to be made.
6. Groups do not meet in clinical settings.

### **Family and Friends Groups:**

Like all HVN groups, Family and Friends groups follow the guidelines listed above. Groups are open only to the relatives, friends, and loved ones of people who hear voices, see visions, or have other associated experiences. One facilitator should be someone who themselves hears voices, sees visions, or similar, while the other facilitator should be a family member or friend of someone with those experiences. Ideally, all facilitators will have completed a full HVN-USA facilitator training.

Family and friends are uniquely positioned to validate the experiences of those who hear voices or otherwise perceive things not perceived by others. At the same time, the experience of family members and friends also benefits from validation and a sense of community as they learn to resist oppressive conventions and develop alternative frameworks for understanding their own and their loved ones' experiences.

These groups shall provide a space in which family members and friends of voice hearers are able to do the following:

1. Respect their loved one's experiences;
2. Examine their beliefs and feelings as a gateway to changing their relationship with their loved one;
3. Take ownership of their fears and examine where the fears come from and how to manage them;
4. Share experiences of what has been helpful and in that context share resources;
5. Explore the family member's experience including the language used when talking about their loved ones;
6. Validate friends' and family members' experiences while at the same time helping them to develop empathy and undo stereotypes and discrimination against voice hearers, and;
7. Create a safer place for family members to talk about their experiences without judgement, ridicule or unsolicited advice.

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*\*On rare occasions, groups may choose to hold a special meeting where they invite others to attend for educational or other purposes. These should always be considered "special meetings", and not regular Hearing voices groups. Everyone who participates must have been given advanced notice of the plan to hold a special meeting, and supported to consider the pros and cons of choosing to participate.*

*\*\* This last item (#19) applies to full and affiliated groups, not family and friends groups.*