

## **A tinnitus counsellors' perspective.**

I have had tinnitus since 1996, June 1996 to be precise. In those early days I thought that I could never live with this intrusion in my life, the constant depression, the never ending anxiety and broken nights with little or what seemed like no sleep. That stage was the lowest ebb in my life, I felt I could not inflict my situation on my wife for the rest of our life together, yes I was seriously suicidal.

I sought help from GPs, Ear Nose and Throat specialists, searched the internet and underwent an MRI searching for answers to this debilitating problem. No matter where I turned there did not seem to be any answers, only empty promises of treatments for hundreds and in many cases thousands of dollars, all without university controlled double blind trials to verify their claims. Around that time I attended a meeting at the Tinnitus Association of Victoria, I met Ross McKeown and we started to meet and research the latest information from around the world on how to manage tinnitus.

Over many months we determined that there was little or no empirical evidence that any of the so called cures or treatments worked. That is when we put together the best information from the leading experts around the world and formulated 'The 4 Keys to Successful Tinnitus Management' program.

We started to offer a phone counselling / advice service (free of charge), which is still the case, we ran monthly seminars, toured country Victoria, Tasmania, did presentations interstate and offered advice via phone, email and Skype, again free of charge to anyone that wanted help with learning to manage their tinnitus. We have helped in excess of an estimated 20,000 people over that time and the Association continues to operate on a volunteer non-profit basis helping people around the world.

Over that time we have heard many stories of the devastation Tinnitus has initially caused people when they first developed tinnitus. I want to list some of the common themes that come through on the many counselling calls we receive each year so that if you experience some of these same fears, anxieties and worries you will know that you are not alone and that help is available, via our phone, Skype or email support services should you need that help.

The majority of people that I talk to via our advice line express a feeling of loss, anxiety and a belief that they will never be able to lead a normal life again. Many fear that the constant intrusion of this noise into their lives will affect their career, their relationships and the ability to enjoy their children growing up, quite apart from the total loss of any social life. I hear these same themes time and time again, even when I tell them that they WILL get on top of this and it will not affect their lives in any way, and when they reach habituation the level of intrusion will only be about 10% of what it is now, they do not believe me, and I would not have believed this either when I first developed tinnitus.

We know that tinnitus fluctuates so progress towards habituation is not a linear progression, it is a roller coaster like ride, we do know that with the correct knowledge of what you need to do (The 4 Keys to Successful Tinnitus Management) and ongoing support from our counsellors, you will get there. Of course everyone wants to know 'how long will this take', unfortunately there is no right or wrong answer as we are all individuals and each of us manages this journey in our own time frame. We do know that if you are a born 'worrier' or you are a perfectionist who searches for answers, it does take longer, as to how long, I can only say I see two distinct phases. The first phase is when you are in the 'distress' stage, and that normally lasts about 3-4 months, after that you start to relax a little about your tinnitus and you start to move towards habituation. This stage lasts in many cases about another 12 months (and it can be longer). During that time you learn to overcome your fears about tinnitus, you learn to change your perception of your tinnitus from something that is a potential threat to accepting that it is just a benign sound that cannot harm you, you learn to shift your focus away from the tinnitus at those times when it is more intrusive, and most importantly you learn relax about your tinnitus and normalise your life.

The advice I give people in the early days can be summarised by the following:

Do not search for 'miracle cures' on the internet, there are none, but there are many charlatans out there making false promises about so called treatments or cures, do not waste your money on them. It is not only a monetary waste it also makes your mind focus on your tinnitus which is counter-productive to you achieving habituation.

Stay away from the tinnitus chat rooms and forums, most are full of horror stories posted by people who 'live' their tinnitus and blame their circumstances (whatever they may be) on their tinnitus.

Providing you do not have a medically treatable condition causing your tinnitus, do not go doctor shopping hoping someone has a cure, the cure is within you and with the help of our counsellors you can and will get to the point where you will not hear your tinnitus most of the day, and even when you do hear it, it will not trigger a negative emotional response within you, which in the early days is the cause of anxiety, depression, lethargy and feelings of hopelessness.

In my case I do not hear my tinnitus for days at a time, but even when I do hear it the level of intrusion is only about 10% of what it was when I first developed it. The sound does not bother me and I often describe it like freckles on my back, I know they are there but they do not bother me, likewise my tinnitus does not have any impact on my life whatsoever, and that is the point you will reach if you follow 'The 4 Keys' strategy and make use of ongoing support via our counselling services.