

ACCEPTING TINNITUS: THE PROBLEM OF FOCUSING AND ATTENTION

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Acknowledging the presence of tinnitus

The first step to accepting tinnitus is to acknowledge its presence, to stop avoiding or denying that it is present, and to acknowledge that it probably won't go away. Unfortunately for most people who have had tinnitus for more than 6 months it is unlikely that it will ever go away completely. So one of the first steps in coming to terms with tinnitus is to admit to yourself that the tinnitus does exist and that it will probably be part of you for the rest of your life.

The importance of getting informed

When you first become aware of your tinnitus you may find yourself constantly thinking about it, worrying about it. Why is it there? What has caused it? Does it mean I've got a brain tumour, that I'm going crazy, that I'm going to go profoundly deaf? Will it ever go away? How can I ever learn to live with this thing? It will drive me crazy! The more you worry about tinnitus the more overwhelming it seems.

Everyone asks these questions. These are a normal reaction and an important part of coming to terms with tinnitus. What is not reasonable is to constantly ask these same questions over and over again, without actively setting out to find the answers to the questions.

Focusing on tinnitus

By constantly worrying about the significance of the tinnitus you keep it at the forefront of your attention, giving the tinnitus a significance in your health and well-being which is most likely unwarranted. This is an essential part of becoming a "tinnitus sufferer". By making tinnitus a focus of your attention you can highlight its persistence and amplify your sense of being plagued by the tinnitus. The more you listen to, or attend to your tinnitus, the louder and more overwhelming it seems to become.

Attention and tinnitus

The process of attending to the tinnitus highlights it in relation to environmental sounds, so that it seems to stand out from, and appears much louder than, other environmental sounds. We all live in a world full of noise. In most situations we are surrounded by a range of different noises and sounds that we can selectively listen to or ignore depending on the situation we are in at the time, the nature of the activity we are engaged in, and our level of emotional excitation or arousal. We never listen to all the sounds that we are capable of hearing in a given situation at the one time. To try and do so would be overwhelming. Typically, we notice one thing after another. The sound of a door banging, the buzzing of a fly, the drone of air conditioning in the room, the rumble of traffic in the distance, all these sounds may be all present at the same time but typically we tend only to notice the sounds one at a time. The process of attention is simply to bring something into our conscious mind, our attention system. We attend first to those things that occur in a surprising way. For example, if the door bangs, it arouses our attention, though if it happens frequently then the power of the sound to grab our attention tends to diminish over time.

Secondly, we attend to those things which are useful to the activity which we are engaged in, for example, the murmur of voices in the next room indicating that guests have arrived. If a sound is boring or repetitive or meaningless, we tend to stop paying attention to it. The ticking of a clock, the hum of air conditioning in a room, the sound of our own breathing, all become monotonous and no longer draw or catch our attention, unless for some reason our attention is drawn to the sound by it changing in some way.

In a similar way when we are engaged in a repetitive activity, like driving a car, our immediate attention can wander from the task. We can drive automatically though our mind may be miles away, but if anything unusual occurs which potentially signals danger, like a flashing red light in the distance, our attention is drawn immediately back to the task at hand.

Tinnitus has been termed a disorder of attention. In most instances tinnitus is not a significant warning signal in terms of your physical or psychological survival. In most cases it is an annoying but benign symptom of changes that have occurred in our auditory functioning. It deserves to be treated like any other repetitive, boring sound in the immediate environment. We should be able to ignore it, to selectively focus our attention away from it, yet often when we first experience tinnitus we cannot stop thinking about it. We worry it, like a dog worries a bone.

Part of the process of adjusting to tinnitus is finding out about our tinnitus, about the significance that it has to our health and emotional well-being so that we can begin to treat it with the disdain that it so richly deserves. If we see our tinnitus as just another boring repetitive sound in the environment, we can choose to attend to it or ignore it as we see fit. Obviously if it changes in some way, or gets louder, our attention will be drawn back to it. But through an understanding of the factors which affect our perception of the tinnitus we can work out what has caused it to change, and through that process allow it to recede back into the general level of background sound.

Mental distraction from tinnitus

When we first notice tinnitus it may seem like an ever-present intrusion, one from which we cannot get any relief. It constantly demands our attention. Yet even when it is at its most apparent, we found that we are able to temporarily forget about it, if we are involved in a task which demands our full concentration. Many people when they first get tinnitus actively seek tasks which demand such concentration, as when absorbing ourselves into a favourite hobby, or doing cross-words or mental tasks, as a way of giving ourselves some relief from the constant awareness of the tinnitus. This approach works quite well during the day but becomes more of a problem at night when we are trying to relax or trying to get to sleep, or if we wake-up during the night, as there is less noise and activity around us to distract us from the tinnitus. When we start to listen to the tinnitus, it seems to get louder and louder and more overwhelming. The more that we focus on it, the louder it seems to get.

Activities which previously allowed us some temporary relief from the pressures of the world, such as daydreaming or sleeping, can become another source of distress and frustration because of the intrusion of tinnitus. This situation shows tinnitus at its most annoying stage as, by disturbing our ability to rest and relax, it starts to undermine our perception of our ability to cope with life in general and our sense of health and well-being.

Distraction as an aid to sleeping

Nearly everyone who experiences a distressing level of tinnitus experiences a period of sleep disturbance. Part of the process of coming to terms with tinnitus is developing a range of strategies to minimize the awareness of tinnitus when trying to sleep or relax. These techniques are intended to enable you to switch your focus of attention away from the tinnitus, without stimulating you to the point where relaxation or sleep becomes impossible.

Refocusing strategies can be either cognitive, that is using the mind or mental activity to distract you from focusing on the tinnitus, or behavioural in that they involve physical activity or sound, to aid switching your focus of attention away from the tinnitus. Nearly all the management techniques or coping strategies that we use to deal with periods of heightened awareness of the tinnitus are a form of distraction or refocusing technique.

Coping strategies and tinnitus

Coping strategies which we use to manage periods of crisis can be divided into two main types of behaviour, these are problem-solving and emotion regulation. Problem solving or problem-focused coping strategies are activities directed towards modifying, avoiding or minimizing the impact of stress, or mental activities that lead to the belief that a source of stress can be controlled.

Emotion regulation or emotion-focused coping strategies refers to attempts to reduce potentially dysfunctional or destructive emotional reactions, which are the result of exposure to stress. Strategies such as denial and wishful thinking are used to avoid direct confrontation with the source of the stress. Some researchers into stress management and coping emphasise the positive adaptive value of problem-solving mechanisms where the problem-focused approach facilitates mastery of the environment. Emotion-focused coping styles, on the other hand, are viewed by some researchers as being less adaptive in comparison to problem-focused coping strategies.

Some examples of problem-solving activities directed towards minimizing of the impact of the tinnitus are:

- a. Seeking information about the significance of tinnitus in your overall health, rather than just worrying about it.
- b. Getting and using a hearing-aid if you also have hearing problems.
- c. Finding out about how you can use sound to overwhelm your awareness of the tinnitus, to give you temporary relief from focusing on the tinnitus.

Some examples of emotion-regulation activities that avoid direct confrontation with the emotional reactions elicited by the tinnitus are:

- a. Denying that you have a problem or pretending that it's not happening (denial can be useful in managing short-term crisis, but if the problem persists denial can be destructive as you can end up ill prepared to cope with a long-term problem)
- b. Wishful thinking, such as hoping that it will just go away, or trying to think about something else which is more pleasant than listening to your tinnitus
- c. Learning and regularly using relaxation and stress management techniques that reduce the level of emotional response to stressful situations.

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