

Dave's Tinnitus Journey

One evening in late April 2017 I went to bed after a school band rehearsal and began noticing some very faint cricket-like sounds in my left ear. I wasn't particularly concerned, and I got up and promptly syringed my ears under the shower to remove the wax that periodically caused me issues from time to time. I had experienced a number of inner ear problems over the years but when the "crickets" were joined by a ringing sound the following day, I went to see my doctor. He diagnosed me with a likely ear infection and armed me with anti-biotics, reassuring me that it had probably caused the noises, a condition called tinnitus, and it was probably temporary. I breathed a sigh of relief and went ahead with a live gig the following Saturday night, but unlike rehearsals- I wore ear plugs.

However, within a matter of days my tinnitus had increased significantly and was clearly audible day and night. I was in an incredible state of panic. I returned to my G.P. who referred me to an E.N.T. and was able to see him within 24 hours. He diagnosed me with tinnitus from sound trauma, though my hearing test revealed I had almost perfect hearing and was still in good condition for my 52 years. He vaguely explained the concept of tinnitus habituation and proceeded to give me an "excellent" chance of recovery. I left feeling happier, though my wife quickly changed my mood when she remarked after the consultation, "You know he basically said you've just got to get used to it."

In the weeks that followed my tinnitus persisted, getting louder and with extra sounds. My anxiety kept going through the roof. Despite being prescribed anti-depressants for anxiety, I walked compulsively, didn't sleep for several days at a time and was constantly restless and agitated. I was becoming convinced that there was no future if this tinnitus "thing" was to stay with me. I started to ruminate about depressing scenarios. My wife was at her wit's end with my manic state. She found the phone number for The Tinnitus Association of Victoria. She rang the number, rang and handed the phone to me. "Just talk to them" she said curtly. "Sam speaking" answered the voice on the other end of the phone. "My name's Dave and I've got tinnitus". Sam politely corrected my Americanised pronunciation of tinnitus (fair enough given I'm an Aussie) and then talked with me for the next 15 minutes or so.

Whilst not everyone's a "talker", I personally found the T.A.V phone counselling service invaluable when I needed support. Sam, Ian and Marg are all experienced members of "The Tinnitus Club" as Marg puts it, and I soon realised that they had an inside understanding of all the stages of tinnitus both in the short and long term. I was relatively inconsolable in my first couple of months of acquiring tinnitus and I would rotate conversations with all three of my new comrades, talking to at least one of them almost every day. (Note: This is not a recommendation but more an indictment on my neurotic behaviour at the time!). My tinnitus seemed to be getting worse the more I listened to it and I just couldn't get my mind around the concept of habituation. I had watched the T.A.V. DVD on tinnitus management. It made perfect sense but because I was still so anxious, depressed and tormented, it all still seemed impossible for me. Yet what I did notice was that the guy on the video, Ross, seemed quite relaxed and happy. And each time I rang these three tinnitus "sufferers" from the T.A.V. who had habituated, it was clear they weren't suffering at all. They sounded completely normal, rational - even happy. When I asked them each explicitly if they were genuinely happy, they confirmed my suspicion.....yes they were! I even visited Ian at his home with my wife and confirmed he was habituated. I'm the original Doubting Thomas!

I was two and a half months in to my tinnitus journey and I was still struggling to let go of my fear that tinnitus would destroy my life. Working was one important way I kept my mind active and I always felt better when I got through the day. I had struggled to get through term two as a community school teacher of students at risk. The welfare co-ordinator and school principle held a meeting with me at the end of term, explaining they had noticed a significant demise in my concentration and increase in my mood swings. Now I felt at risk. I promised them that a holiday break planned in Malaysia would make all the difference. Little did I know it would make a difference in some unexpected ways.

When I got to Malaysia I realised my tinnitus had followed me! And I finally had to accept I had tinnitus. The hot weather helped to calm my nerves and I started to feel a bit less anxious and depressed. I didn't even ring my tinnitus "comrades". This first week of my holidays saw a great improvement in my outlook. I felt like I'd broken out of

a prison. I even swam in a lake. Everything was looking up.... but what I didn't know was that I had ingested bacteria from the lake which had started a liver abscess to grow inside of me. I was diagnosed with the flu but two weeks later I was hospitalised for weeks back in Melbourne and had nurses come to my home for the next month whilst the abscess fluid was drained. Strangely enough, this shifted my perception of my tinnitus. I started to realise I would have other problems in life and maybe my tinnitus might not always be the biggest deal. This was reinforced by the doctors who when enquiring about my medical history were way more impressed by my cardiac arrest three years ago than my tinnitus!

While recovering from my liver abscess over those seven weeks back home, my focus started slowly shifting from my tinnitus back to my life. Even though I wasn't well (and maybe because I was bored) I started reading, preparing lessons, cooking, cleaning, watching T.V. and walking a little. I returned to playing guitar again and engaging in "two way" conversations with visitors and the Hospital to the Home nurses. I even started to make my wife laugh again with humour instead of giving her disturbing hourly updates on my tinnitus. My depression was gradually lifting and my anxiety was decreasing. I was now sleeping eight hours uninterrupted. It was getting harder to hear my tinnitus the more engaged with life. In fact my tinnitus was starting to sound different and kind of..... boring. It seemed less intense and was starting to sound like more like a background hiss. Was I habituating? I finally got clearance from the doctors regarding my liver issue and was able to return to work. It was time to normalise my life!

My first week back at work was such a contrast to my last week of the previous term. It was four months since I had first developed the beginning signs of tinnitus and seven weeks since I'd been to work. I now drove to work with an improved confidence but not without a little trepidation. When I walked in the staffroom everyone in the room could read my face. I was back and I was feeling GOOD! My concentration seemed back to near full capacity! I cracked a joke about the staffroom fridge finally getting fixed. Everyone laughed with joy and relief. The rest of the week seemed like a walk in the park. I was back on top of my teaching, fully engaged with students and colleagues. I was back to my old self. By Friday of my first week I was back playing electric guitar and singing with the staff band at our curry night. This time I wore decent ear plugs!

ADVICE: Keep working/active for your own sanity - (unless you end up in hospital - then do the crossword!),

You don't have to climb Everest – just try doing your usual "thing". This will be helpful, rewarding and not without its challenges

Stay off the internet blog sites, they are full of negativity and horror stories that will retard your progress towards habituation.. Contact the T.A.V. if you feel you need support and/or inspiration,

My particular journey does highlight that the initial fear and lack of acceptance of tinnitus can really stall a sufferers recovery. Letting go of fear and changing both my perception of tinnitus and my "self talk" made a huge difference in redefining its impact. I remember the particular day when I said to myself " It's not too hard to imagine this ringing becoming a faint background noise". A positive attitude really started to shift things for me and habituation became a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The 4 Keys approach that the Tinnitus Association promotes really does work:

1. Address your fears with one of the TAV counsellors.
2. Change your perception of tinnitus from a potential threat to just a benign sound.
3. Learn to shift your focus from the tinnitus to things you enjoy.
4. And critically, 'normalise your life' so that you are doing what you did prior to developing tinnitus.

The T.A.V. offers a wonderful service via its free counselling service, the three counsellors all have conquered their tinnitus and they can help you conquer yours.

David