

DEALING WITH ANXIETY DISORDERS AND DEPRESSION

Ross McKeown

One common problem we frequently deal with on the TAV telephone advice line is callers with tinnitus who are struggling with depression and anxiety disorders. If we consider the depression to be mild or moderate, we have strategies that we have found to be helpful that we discuss with the caller. However, if the caller is severely depressed or describes a debilitating anxiety disorder, we strongly urge them to seek professional help.

The counsellors suffered from depression and anxiety in the early stages of our tinnitus, so we are able to empathise with such people, and they are aware that they are talking to someone who understands both tinnitus and depression.

The depression Cycle

When we are depressed, we tend to lose our motivation to do things. As a result, we find ourselves doing less and less and this in turn tends to make us more depressed. This depression cycle must be broken. It is important to force yourself to become more physically and mentally active.

The following quote goes to the heart of the problem:

“Do the opposite to what your depression tells you to do. If you are inclined to stay in bed, then get out. If you do not want to go to the concert, then go. It’s important not to let your moods take control and guide the way you act.”

From “Beating The Blues” by Sue Tanner and Jillian Ball

Stay active

When we force ourselves to do something, whether it be some gardening, cleaning out a cupboard, or meeting a friend for coffee, we generally feel much better as a result. There is usually a sense of pleasure and achievement for having made the effort.

Sarah Edelman, PhD, in her excellent book, “Change Your Thinking” writes about the benefits of physical exercise:

“Doing regular exercise, such as brisk walking, jogging, swimming, weight bearing exercises or working out in a gym, enhances our mood and helps to protect us from depression. Several studies have found that regular physical exercise can be as effective as anti-depressant medication for resolving depression among people with mild to moderate depression.

There are different theories on how it works, from boosting the production of endorphins (our body’s natural opiates) to increasing neurotransmitters such as norepinephrine and dopamine, which in turn elevate mood. Regular exercise also increases our available energy, which gives us greater reserves to deal with stressful situations that arise. In addition, by changing our environment and activity we distract ourselves from negative thoughts...”

From “Change Your Thinking” by Sarah Edelman, PhD,

It saddens me when counselling tinnitus sufferers to hear they have given up things they enjoy because of their tinnitus.

Three cases come to mind. A keen golfer had given up golf because he claimed his tinnitus prevented him enjoying his golf. A lawn bowler had done likewise, and an elderly woman had stopped having a daily cappuccino with friends at a local café because she had been told that caffeine was bad for her tinnitus. After reassuring the woman that caffeine in moderation was unlikely to affect her tinnitus, I urged all three to continue to pursue their respective pleasures for a few months and then phone me back.

The golfer was loving his golf again, and in fact was thrilled that he had lowered his golf handicap. The bowler was enjoying his bowls again; particularly the social side of bowls, and the woman was once again enjoying her daily coffee with friends.

Tinnitus should not be a reason to stop doing the things we enjoy. Having tinnitus and also being hearing impaired, the only change I have made to my lifestyle is to avoid noisy venues. I am not prepared to risk permanently worsening my hearing and tinnitus. Otherwise, my life continues as it did prior to my tinnitus.

As Sarah Edelman concluded in her excellent chapter on ‘Recovery From Depression’:

“Although depression decreases our energy and motivation, it is extremely important to stay active. Any activity that provides a sense of achievement or pleasure reduces despondency and elevates mood. Social activities and physical exercise are particularly helpful.”

For those of us with tinnitus, there is an increased need to step up our mental and physical activity, because, as we mention in our seminars, an active brain gives little attention to the tinnitus.

Age should not be a barrier

Staying mentally and physically active within our capabilities should always be our aim. However, elderly people often mistakenly believe that they are beyond many activities which they previously enjoyed.

“At ninety, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Guggenheim Museum. At seventy-eight, Benjamin Franklin invented bifocal spectacles. In studies of creativity, it was found that while the ages thirty-five to fifty-five are the peak of creativity in most fields, people in their sixties and seventies, though they work at a slower speed, are as productive as they were in their twenties. When Pablo Casals, the cellist, was ninety-one years old, he was approached by a student who asked, ‘Master, why do you continue to practice?’ Casals replied, ‘Because I am making progress.’

From “The Brain That Changes Itself” by Norman Doidge, MD

A personal friend of mine gained her Doctor of Philosophy in fine arts in her late seventies. At the age of eighty-three she successfully applied to the British Museum to pay her own way and join a team for an archeological dig in Turkey. She said it was one of the most rewarding experiences in her life.

People with depression and anxiety disorders usually suffer from their mental disorder prior to the onset of tinnitus, and not the other way around. However, whether depression existed prior to the onset of the tinnitus, or a person has become anxious and depressed because of their tinnitus, it is important to seek help.

Talking to your G.P. and spending time with an experienced tinnitus counsellor would be a good start.

It is important to note that you can’t always identify the cause of depression nor change troubling circumstances. The most important thing is to recognise the depression and to seek help. Remember, the sooner you get treatment, the greater the chance of a fast recovery.

Anxiety disorders

We all feel anxious from time to time, however, for some people, these anxious feelings are overwhelming and cannot be brought under control easily. An anxiety disorder is more than just feeling stressed – it's a serious condition which makes it hard for the person to cope from day to day. Anxiety disorders are very common. One in four people will experience an anxiety disorder at some stage in their lives. Anxiety is common, especially for some in the early stages of their tinnitus. The sooner you get help, the sooner you will learn to control the condition.

What causes depression?

Most people assume that depression is caused simply by recent personal difficulties or a chemical imbalance in the brain. Depression, however, is often caused by the mix of recent events and other longer- term or personal risk factors.

Research indicates that ongoing difficulties, such as long-term unemployment or living in an abusive or uncaring relationship, are more likely to cause depression than recent life stressors.

Depression can also run-in families and some people will be at increased genetic risk. However, this doesn't mean that you will automatically become depressed if a parent or close relative has had the illness. Life circumstances are still likely to have an important influence on your chances of becoming ill. It's also common for people to experience depression and anxiety at the same time.

Seeking help

For more information about anxiety disorders and depression, symptom checklists, effective treatments and where to get help, visit www.beyondblue.org.au or www.youthbeyondblue.com or call the Beyond Blue info line on 1300 22 4636.

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