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**TUNING OUT THE NOISE:
HOW COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY CAN HELP YOU KEEP TINNITUS
FROM RUINING YOUR LIFE**

Some Facts about Tinnitus You Should Know

Tinnitus is a stressful, painful disorder. Arming yourself with knowledge is one way to cope more effectively with the flood of worries that having a chronic condition with no definitive cure can release.

- 1) Tinnitus is very common. It affects an estimated 10 to 20 percent of the general population in countries all over the world. Among those over 65 years of age, the number is even higher: about 30 percent. In **approximately 5 percent of the general population, tinnitus is “clinically significant,” meaning** it is severe enough to prompt seeking medical attention; for 1 out of 100 adults, it is a debilitating problem.



2) Nearly half of patients with tinnitus have increased sensitivity to sound, or hyperacusis. Of those with hyperacusis, about 25 percent are bothered more by hyperacusis than by tinnitus. Some people experience hyperacusis in the

absence of tinnitus.

- 3) Tinnitus is a symptom, not a disease. It can have many different **causes, including hearing loss, acoustic neuromas, Meniere's syndrome, ear infections, and medications.**
- 4) Several problems frequently associated with tinnitus can adversely affect quality of life and general health:



- Emotional reactions, such as irritability, feelings of helplessness, depression, and anxiety
- Impaired hearing and concentration
- Insomnia, defined as difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep

How Can Psychology Add to Our Understanding of Tinnitus?

No definitive cure for tinnitus exists, and many people consult multiple **specialists in an effort to find some relief. You may have been told, “You have to learn to live with it.” Such advice doesn’t give you any useful information and** may even have contributed to your frustration. The unremitting toll tinnitus takes on your energy, concentration, and emotional resources can wear you down and **make you feel hopeless. So it’s not surprising that** between 20 and 50 percent of people with severe, chronic tinnitus also have clinically significant depression.

You may have wondered whether you caused your tinnitus by being unduly worried, depressed, or unable to cope with a highly stressful period in your life. Some ignorant friends or family members may even have implied that the tinnitus is all “in your head” (which it is, but not in the way they mean). Take heart. At least you can put your concerns about your sanity to rest.

While we know preexisting psychological conditions can affect how a person reacts to tinnitus, researchers haven’t found that psychiatric problems directly cause tinnitus. Rather, an individual who has always had trouble coping with stress might find a relatively mild degree of tinnitus extremely distressing; someone who is more emotionally resilient might tolerate a higher level of tinnitus without feeling as upset by it. In fact, studies of thousands of patients with tinnitus have shown little, if any, relationship between objective measures of loudness and how severe they perceive their tinnitus to be.

If your tinnitus is relentless, you may feel despair. Some people fear their tinnitus will drive them crazy. They may even have thoughts of suicide when their tinnitus is at its worst. However, despite the prevalence of depression in people with tinnitus, tinnitus as a precipitating factor in suicide is very rare. More likely, those with tinnitus who actually do attempt suicide suffer from more serious psychiatric illnesses that were present long before the onset of their tinnitus.

The relationship between anxiety and tinnitus is important to consider. Research findings suggest a heightened “anxiety sensitivity” in the people with tinnitus who find their symptoms the most distressing. Anxiety sensitivity refers to a fearful reaction to the physical and emotional symptoms of anxiety. This “worry about worry” makes it much more difficult to cope with a taxing problem such as tinnitus. Learning



to cope with anxiety will help you manage your tinnitus much more effectively and prevent it from overtaking your life.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for Tinnitus

CBT has shown promise as a treatment method for tinnitus. While it doesn't eliminate the symptoms, the techniques patients learn during a course of cognitive-behavioral treatment can significantly reduce their distress.



The basic premise underlying all CBT methods is that our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are interconnected. We can change our emotional reactions to a situation by modifying our thinking and our actions.

We can conceptualize the interaction among physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral factors in the tinnitus distress cycle like this:



For

example:

A precipitating situation, such as exposure to a loud noise, elicits thoughts ("This will make my tinnitus worse!" "I can't stand it!" "I'll never be able to get to sleep tonight!"), which lead to feelings of depression and anxiety that lead to

behavior, such as withdrawal, avoidance of the triggering stimulus, and hyperattention to physical reactions, which makes the tinnitus and the negative thoughts intensify, and so on.

How Can CBT Help?

As the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus observed, **“People are not distressed by things, but by the view they take of them.”** CBT can break the tinnitus distress cycle and lessen the adverse effects of tinnitus on quality of life, family relationships, and well being by changing unhelpful attitudes and patterns of behavior.

Goals of CBT for Tinnitus

- Learn to identify connections among thoughts, feelings, behavior, environment, and tinnitus symptoms
- Learn more adaptive ways to cope with the symptoms
- Learn to accept the uncertainty of living with a chronic condition
- Learn to challenge beliefs that promote feelings of helplessness
- Learn to view tinnitus as a challenge rather than a threat



Characteristics of CBT

The specific components of a cognitive-behavioral treatment package may vary, but several elements of the CBT approach are standard.



idence-based



- Educational
- Transparent
- Collaborative
- Active
- Time-limited

The CBT Toolbox

Treatment strategies will vary depending on individual needs and the therapist's approach. The emphasis is on stocking a toolbox of techniques. Some elements of the CBT toolbox are:

- ✚ Mindfulness techniques
- ✚ Cognitive restructuring
- ✚ Behavioral activation
- ✚ Exposure to tinnitus triggers



Taking Back Your Life

There is no cure for tinnitus. But by far the majority of people with tinnitus learn to cope with it and lead fulfilling lives. You can, too.