

Mindfulness for tinnitus



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People can and do manage the impact that tinnitus has on their lives. Mindfulness may be one technique to try if tinnitus is causing you distress.

Introduction

Tinnitus is a very common condition, affecting one in seven people in the UK. The experience varies from person to person. Many people with tinnitus live with it without suffering. Some studies show that there are only weak links between distress and loudness, suggesting that severity is not linked to volume.

Research has also shown that it is possible to learn to live with tinnitus. Mindfulness may be one technique to try if tinnitus is causing you distress.

Unlike other techniques, mindfulness does not aim to change the nature or sound of tinnitus. Instead it involves building a better relationship with it.

The psychology of tinnitus

Over time, most people with tinnitus habituate to it. This is a natural process where the brain adjusts to the presence of tinnitus and stops responding to it. As a result, the individual becomes less aware of the noise.

Some people can remain aware and distressed by tinnitus for longer. Two of the biggest obstacles to habituation are worry and attentional focus. Sometimes the experience of tinnitus can be so intrusive that people find they cannot live their life as they wish. The tinnitus can seem like an increasing and overwhelming threat which leads to the person becoming more and more focused on the noises. This narrows the focus of attention more upon tinnitus, which slows down the natural process of habituation.

This worry and attentional focus lead people to change their behaviour in other ways. In particular, they understandably try to do anything and everything they can to push tinnitus away. This might include using noise or sound generators to mask tinnitus, and avoiding quiet places where tinnitus



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may become more obvious. They may try to avoid noisy environments, which they fear will make tinnitus worse. Sometimes people may try to keep physically or mentally busy all of the time so they can ignore or distract away from tinnitus.

This 'fight' with tinnitus may seem like the only option but it often makes tinnitus worse. Efforts to push tinnitus away paradoxically keep tinnitus in the centre of attention. Such a demanding mental effort can lead to exhaustion. And as tinnitus persists, the individual feels as if it is increasingly uncontrollable, as their usual ways of fixing a problem are not working. This can lead to anxiety and low mood, and habituation is also less likely to happen.

If fighting tinnitus is preventing habituation and making things worse, then what might happen if we did the opposite? Mindfulness-based therapies suggest doing just that. Rather than using energy to try to get rid of tinnitus, learning to allow it to be present can lead to a new and less negative relationship to the noises.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a form of meditation that is all about learning to pay attention to our experience in a specific way:

"Paying attention... in the present moment, on purpose and non-judgementally"

(Jon Kabat-Zinn)

Mindfulness involves learning formal meditation practices. You pay purposeful attention to experiences in the moment, such as the breath, body sensations, visual images, or sounds. This quality of mindful awareness can be brought to



daily life, for example, when brushing your teeth, eating a meal or washing the dishes.

For most of us, these activities have become so automatic that we do them on 'autopilot'. Rather than focusing on what is happening in the present moment, our mind wanders far away – replaying past events, worrying about the future, or simply planning what to have for dinner.

Mindfulness brings us back to the present moment. This has many advantages. It can enrich our present experience as we become more aware of all of our senses. It can also help us to get less caught up in negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours that can drive emotional distress, and our experience of tinnitus.

Where does mindfulness come from?

Mindfulness originates from Buddhist meditation practice. Over the past few decades, it has been taken up by Western medicine and developed into a non-religious, therapeutic approach to managing difficult health problems. The founder of this approach, Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, found that it was extremely helpful for patients with chronic stress and illness, for whom standard medical approaches offered little benefit.



Since the 1980s, hundreds of research articles have been published demonstrating the wide range of positive effects that mindfulness meditation can have across health conditions including high blood pressure, chronic pain, cancer and fatigue. More recently, mindfulness has been integrated with modern psychological techniques and is a proven effective treatment for emotional disorders, particularly depression. Mindfulness also benefits general wellbeing for people without any particular physical or mental health difficulties.

How can mindfulness help tinnitus?

We have growing evidence that mindfulness can lead to improvements in living with tinnitus. It does not aim to 'fix' tinnitus or make it go away, but rather make it less intrusive, to a point where it is no longer a problem.

Practicing mindfulness meditation can cultivate a more helpful way of responding to tinnitus by encouraging gentle interest, curiosity, non-judgment, and even acceptance, rather than 'fighting it' or 'pushing it away'.

Mindfulness does not aim to change the nature or sound of the tinnitus. Instead, it can help to build a better relationship with it which can aid habituation.

How does therapy work?

It can be difficult to change how you react to something like tinnitus, so mindfulness therapy for tinnitus begins slowly. The steps below are the ones followed by the authors of this leaflet.

Sessions start by learning how to pay mindful attention to aspects of daily life, such as eating, the sensations in parts of the body or feeling the physical sensations of the breath. The group go through simple meditations together, and these are repeated at home. Regular practice is important as it helps you to become more familiar with the technique.

Over time, it is possible to begin to spend brief moments deliberately paying mindful attention to sound and tinnitus. Understandably, this can lead to some anxiety. Doing it in a group setting makes it easier to be able to test out these fears in a safe way. 'Turning towards' the sounds, in a calm and gentle way, can allow people to find that the sounds do not appear as threatening as expected. Research shows that people who learn to 'allow' tinnitus will find it less distressing over time.

This practice also reveals habitual responses to difficult experiences. Many people describe negative thoughts about tinnitus, focusing on the losses it has led to and the fears of what will happen in the future. These negative thoughts can cause powerful emotional responses such as anxiety, anger or sadness. They keep the mind fixated on the tinnitus, preventing habituation. By becoming more aware through mindfulness practice, we learn to 'recognise' these thoughts. We can also recognise how they can spiral into familiar patterns of emotions and behaviours.



The insight gained through meditation can allow us to choose how to respond to these negative thoughts so that they are less likely to lead automatically to painful emotions and unhelpful behaviour.

Further reading and resources

Mindfulness meditation courses are taught across the country, although at this time, few have been adapted to be tinnitus-specific.

It is also possible to learn a lot about mindfulness from the many books and websites that are available on the topic. We would recommend the following as a place to start:

- Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World by Mark Williams and Danny Penman.
- The Mindful Way through Depression by Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal & Jon Kabat-Zinn.
- Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice, Bangor University
www.bangor.ac.uk/centre-for-mindfulness
- Bemindful www.bemindfulonline.com

Case study: the authors' experiences with mindfulness for tinnitus

Since 2010, we have been offering Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) to patients with chronic tinnitus attending the Royal National Throat Nose and Ear Hospital. Our treatment is based on the standard 8-week MBCT course that is offered in other settings. We adapted it for people with troubling tinnitus, and it is taught by clinical psychologists with expertise in working with tinnitus and other audiological conditions. Since this time, hundreds of patients have attended our groups, and we have gathered strong evidence that this approach is of great benefit to them.

In 2017 we published two papers that demonstrate that MBCT is an effective treatment for people with distressing tinnitus.

A randomised controlled trial, funded by Tinnitus UK, compared MBCT for tinnitus to relaxation training. This study clearly showed that MBCT led to significant reductions in the distress caused by tinnitus than relaxation. These improvements lasted for longer and got even better in the six months following treatment. It also led to reduced levels of emotional distress and disability.

We looked at how patients were before and after attending MBCT routinely in our clinic. We followed 188 patients from the beginning to the end of the course of meditation and found that the treatment was associated with significant and reliable improvements in tinnitus-related and emotional distress.

We also asked patients to give us feedback on their experiences of mindfulness.

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Most of the feedback was extremely positive, and showed how treatment helped people not only to habituate to tinnitus but also to cope with other difficulties that life throws at us:

“The mindfulness course I attended for tinnitus gave me many practical and effective ways of alleviating my distress. It has improved my well-being and my everyday life. It has proved to be a positive and lasting gift - and I know many of the people on the course feel the same.”

“Completing the mindfulness course gave me a tool with which to finally try to cope with tinnitus and the resultant stress. It was not a cure and was never sold as such but it offered a way of approaching life, not just tinnitus, which showed that there were ways of trying to alleviate the significant distress caused by this chronic condition.”

“I am more able to observe myself having worries or fear and to pull back rather than getting overwhelmed. I am seeing more clearly that I don't have to continue negative thought sequences”

“Mindful meditation helped me to think (and not think) about tinnitus in ways that had not occurred before, and in doing so made tinnitus much less of a burden to carry. It did not fix my tinnitus but it fixed me in a way that made tinnitus easier to bear. I now feel as if I live in the same universe as everybody else. I wouldn't be anywhere else.”

The mindfulness approach is radically different from what most tinnitus sufferers have tried before, and it may not be right for everyone. We are confident, however, that the growing research base has demonstrated how it can offer an exciting new approach to people who may have found that traditional treatment has not been able to help them.

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Help and support

The Tinnitus UK Support Team can answer your questions on any tinnitus related topics:

Telephone: **0800 018 0527**

Web chat: **tinnitus.org.uk**

Email: **helpline@tinnitus.org.uk**

Text/SMS: **07537 416841**

We also offer a free tinnitus e-learning programme, Take on Tinnitus at **takeontinnitus.co.uk**

References

The list of references consulted in the production of this leaflet is available on request.

Alternative formats

This publication is available in large print on request.

Feedback

We welcome feedback on all our information.

You can pass your comments to our Communications Team:

Telephone: **0114 250 9933**

Email: **communications@tinnitus.org.uk**

or by writing to us at the address on page 6.

Tinnitus UK publications

**Available in Easy Read*

Our information leaflets are written by leading tinnitus professionals and provide accurate, reliable and authoritative information which is updated regularly. Please contact us if you would like to receive a copy of any of our information leaflets listed below, or they can be downloaded from our website.

For adults:

*All about tinnitus**
Complementary therapy for tinnitus: an opinion
Drugs and tinnitus
Ear wax removal and tinnitus
Flying and the ear
Food, drink and tinnitus
*Hearing aids and tinnitus**
Hyperacusis
Ideas for relaxation without sound
Information for musicians
Mindfulness for tinnitus
Musical hallucination (musical tinnitus)
Noise and the ear
Otosclerosis

Pulsatile tinnitus
Relaxation
*Self help for tinnitus**
Sound therapy
Sources of mutual support for tinnitus
Supporting someone with tinnitus
Taming tinnitus
Tinnitus and disorders of the temporomandibular joint (TMJ) and neck
Tinnitus and pregnancy
Tinnitus: a parent's guide
Tinnitus: a teacher's guide
Tinnitus and sleep disturbance
Tinnitus and stress
*Tinnitus services**

For children:

Ellie, Leila and Jack have tinnitus (under 8s)
Tinnitus (8-11 year olds)
Tinnitus (11-16 year olds)
Ellie, Leila and Jack have tinnitus activity book
Tinnitus activity book (8-11 year olds)
Tinnitus activity book (11-16 year olds)



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