

Taming tinnitus

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People can and do manage the impact that tinnitus has on their lives. Here are some ideas for ways to minimise the intrusiveness of the noises.

'Forgetting' the tinnitus

Although tinnitus is very common, research shows that only a small percentage of people are aware of it all the time or are distressed by it. In the same way that you get used to noises around you (like air conditioning, a clock ticking or aeroplanes overhead), it is possible to do the same with tinnitus. This is known as **habituation**.

The noises we are most able to 'forget' are predictable, repetitive sounds that we perceive as benign, non-threatening, and unimportant. If you focus your attention on something else, it may be possible to 'forget' the tinnitus and it will have less impact. Here are some ideas for starving tinnitus of attention.

Do:

- **Notice environments and activities where your tinnitus is less intrusive.** Try to do more activities that help shift your attention away from the tinnitus. These will probably be activities you enjoy or are interested in.
- **Expect that tinnitus will be more noticeable in some environments** where there is less background noise, such as a bedroom. You could try making these spaces more 'tinnitus friendly' by introducing some low-level sound.
- **Take some time each day to switch your attention between the tinnitus noises and other bodily sensations.** For example, close your eyes and take a couple of minutes to focus on the rhythm of your breathing, then switch your attention to your hands and mentally count your fingers, refocus on your breathing, switch to monitoring your tinnitus, then focus on your breathing again. Notice how you are able to control your attention.



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- **Build your tinnitus into a pleasant mental image.** Some people find this can help to reduce the distress it causes. For example, if your tinnitus sounds like waves crashing, take some time each day to shut your eyes and picture a beach. If the tinnitus sounds like whistling, try to picture a kettle boiling and making a cup of tea. The more often you are able to link your tinnitus with something pleasant, even if only for a few seconds, the more likely it is that the distress will reduce.

- **Explore whether there is anything else on your mind** that you need to sort out when you notice that the tinnitus is demanding your attention. Tinnitus can work as an 'emotional barometer' – it is often more intrusive when there is stress or worry around. If there is something else on your mind, try to resolve the matter. If it can't be sorted out, acknowledge this and note to yourself that worrying will not help.

- **Spend time doing tasks that are relaxing.** Being stressed means you are more likely to react negatively to challenges, including tinnitus. Actively plan things which help you to relax.

Don't:

- **Avoid activities you think may make your tinnitus worse.** Try to live your life in spite of tinnitus. Planning your life around tinnitus gives it more importance, which will stop you from habituating to it. It also might mean you stop activities that make you feel good. Remember, what's good for life is good for tinnitus.

- **Put your life on hold.** Tinnitus does not have to control your life. It is possible to learn to control it through management techniques. There may be no proven cure, but that doesn't mean the situation is hopeless.



- **Focus on avoiding tinnitus all the time.** Giving tinnitus too much importance can stop you 'forgetting' about it.

- **'Test' your tinnitus.** It may be tempting to test whether you can hear the tinnitus over the TV or if the sounds you are hearing are tinnitus or your sound generator. But each time you do this, you are guiding your attention towards it. If your tinnitus worries you, it is hard to stop monitoring it, but notice when you are doing it and move your attention to something else.

Be kind to yourself

Sometimes you may think that you 'should cope better' or that you are 'not very good at dealing with your tinnitus.' However, taming tinnitus can be very difficult. For some people, tinnitus triggers the body's 'fight-or-flight' system, also known as the sympathetic nervous system, which prepares the body for emergencies. Body and mind then process tinnitus as dangerous, threatening, and important. It happens very fast and is difficult to control.

Try to:

- **Acknowledge that you are dealing with tinnitus as best as you can** at this moment, given what you know and can do. If you think you could do better in the future, think about what



you might do differently next time, for example, practising the steps in the 'Forgetting the tinnitus' section.

- **Remember that it takes time for the connection between tinnitus and danger to unravel.** While the body's fight-or-flight system reacts very fast, it is slow to modify this reaction.

Try not to:

- **blame yourself.** This just adds to stress and bad feelings. Stress is usually counterproductive. If you are upset and stressed you are less likely to perceive tinnitus as benign, non-threatening, and unimportant.

Getting to sleep

Many people with tinnitus believe that the noises disrupt their sleep. If you have difficulty getting off to sleep it may be that the shift from a relatively noisy daytime environment to the quietness of the bedroom makes the tinnitus noises more noticeable.

Consider:

- **Having a low-level sound playing in your bedroom.** Some people say that wave sounds, a fan or calming music help them to go to sleep. However, using sound that is too loud or attention-grabbing (e.g. listening to a talk programme on the radio) may get in the way of falling asleep. Explore what works for you.

- **Reducing your caffeine intake in the evening.**
- **Making a point of winding down at least half an hour before going to bed.** Try doing relaxation exercises or listening to soothing music. Avoid stimulating activities like social media, puzzles or talk programmes on the radio.
- **Training yourself to stop planning or worrying before bed.** Spend a maximum of 10 minutes in the early evening, writing down ideas or issues you want to tackle tomorrow.
- **Going to bed when you feel tired rather than at a set time.**
- **Using your bed only for sleeping.** Try not to watch TV, eat, or work on your computer in bed.

Try not to:

- **Panic if you don't get to sleep within 25 minutes of turning the lights out.** Get up, move to another room, and do something relaxing until you begin to feel more tired. Then go back to bed. Be careful not to do something too stimulating. Repeat this process until you get to sleep.
- **Cat-nap in the daytime.** If you can't resist then keep it short, say 15 minutes.

Getting back to sleep

Some people believe that tinnitus wakes them in the night. This is unlikely to be the case. Sleep naturally goes in cycles, with brief periods of waking in between each cycle, which we tend not to remember. However, if you tune into your tinnitus during one of these periods, you might think it's your tinnitus that's woken you up.

If you are having difficulty returning to sleep after waking in the night, here are some suggestions for how to get back to



sleep.

Try to:

- **Drink less or no alcohol at night.** Whilst even a small amount of alcohol makes falling asleep easier, it will also disrupt the second part of your sleep cycle and wake you up.
- **Whisper a nonsense-word (e.g. 'dah') over and over.** This may help to distract from intrusive thoughts or worries.

Try not to:

- **Panic if you wake up.** Your body will ensure you get the minimum sleep you need, but you can help it along by staying calm and relaxed. If you don't get to sleep within 25 minutes of turning the lights out, practice the tips in the 'Getting to sleep' section above.

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 5.

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*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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