

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Tinnitus

Bruce Hubbard, Ph.D.

ATA Professional Member since 2014

“I’m trapped! It won’t stop! It’s on 24-7 and I can’t think about anything else. I’m desperate for relief, but convinced relief won’t come.

My life is ruined. I’m certain that I can never learn to live with tinnitus!”

I am an experienced clinical psychologist who has worked with countless patients, including many with severe tinnitus. But the words above are not from one of my patients. They came from my own lips, nine years ago, when my life was hijacked by tinnitus. These panicked, pessimistic sentiments reflect a condition called *tinnitus distress*—a perfect storm of anger, annoyance, anxiety, fear, sadness, and despair, that impairs concentration, interferes with sleep, and disrupts functioning in all areas of life. Even as a behavioral health specialist, the relentless whine of tinnitus had me trapped in a synergy of hurt.

For many years, predating my tinnitus, I have specialized in a science-based form of mental health treatment called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT is a set of learned skills—healthy habits and perspectives—that work together to change a person’s emotional response to stress and trauma. In 2005, at the height of my tinnitus distress, I used CBT to help successfully manage my own condition.

What Causes Tinnitus Distress?

Thank your brain, for it errs on the side of keeping you safe. Your brain is constantly on the alert for potential danger. Any unexpected sensory stimulus—a movement in your peripheral vision, a sudden noise, the feeling of something crawling up your leg—can

trigger your brain to react against a possible threat. This reaction is what scientists call *hypervigilance*.

Not surprisingly, your brain judges tinnitus—a loud, uncontrollable noise—as a threat to your wellbeing, and it puts your body on alert. Tinnitus distress is your brain sounding the alarm about a perceived possible danger.



Of course, many suspected threats turn out to be false alarms. In most cases, the brain quickly learns that a stimulus is not a threat. It then relaxes hypervigilance and the sensory perception is gradually screened out of awareness through a process called *habituation*. Habituation explains why people routinely stop noticing loud, annoying noises after prolonged exposure. A passing train, the roar of a freeway, air traffic, and the hum of a refrigerator are common examples of noises that eventually succumb to habituation.

For all its bluster, the sounds of tinnitus are a false alarm—distracting and annoying, yes, but ultimately harmless and unimportant. Research shows that the majority of people with tinnitus do habituate and are no longer bothered by the sounds. Until we can silence tinnitus for good, ignoring tinnitus sounds through habituation is a highly desirable end.

So, why do some people habituate to tinnitus and others do not? Research indicates that it’s not the tinnitus itself, but the person’s emotional response to tinnitus that determines the course of habituation. An emotional response that consists of resisting and bracing against tinnitus maintains hypervigilance by reinforcing the brain’s perception that tinnitus is an imminent threat, an “intruder” that must be closely monitored. Rather than learning to ignore tinnitus, the persistently hypervigilant brain is locked into a negative pattern that maintains emotional distress and prevents habituation.

With practice and patience, CBT can help the patient habituate to tinnitus and quiet the alarm in the brain.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can help break this pattern by changing how the patient thinks and behaves in response to tinnitus. With practice and patience, CBT can help the patient habituate to tinnitus and quiet the alarm in the brain.

Careful Thinking: Getting a New Perspective on Tinnitus

Our internal thoughts (cognitions) can exert a strong influence over our feelings and actions. Personal judgments, beliefs, and expectations can either nurture healthy emotions and lifestyle, or promote suffering, avoidance, and withdrawal.

In my experience working with tinnitus patients—and even in my own personal ordeal with tinnitus—I have seen how negative thinking reinforces hypervigilance, blocks habituation, and impedes recovery. Common examples are “catastrophizing,” where the patient jumps to the worst case scenario without considering other, more likely outcomes, and “Mental Filter” where the patient picks out a single negative detail and dwells on it exclusively so that their vision of all reality becomes darkened.

CBT begins with a careful look at the patient’s thoughts to identify cognitive patterns that fan the flames of tinnitus distress. The goal is to develop reasonable judgments and expectations about tinnitus, a new perspective that is *grounded by facts*, to provide reassurance and guidance throughout recovery.

Acceptance and Mindfulness: Learning to Share Your Space with Tinnitus

The inner world of tinnitus distress is characterized by resisting, fighting, longing with every fiber of your being for the sounds to stop. Such resistance is understandable—tinnitus is genuinely stressful. But the fact remains that there is no *off* switch for tinnitus. We

(continued on page 14)

“The Breathing Space”

Here is a mindfulness exercise to help soften your inner relationship with tinnitus. The goal is to practice adopting a new stance toward tinnitus, one that is open and accepting, that allows tinnitus to exist as a strand in the fabric of your being. Think of mindfulness as stepping back from a fire—you may still feel the heat, but are no longer consumed by the flames. The exercise takes about three minutes, though this may vary as time and emotional stamina permit:

- First, *observe your experience* by gently turning your attention to sensations, then feelings, then thoughts, each in turn. You may notice the sounds of tinnitus. For these few minutes, practice allowing these sounds to be present, as part of your whole experience, observing your experience neutrally, in the present moment, just letting it unfold as it will.
- Now *turn your attention to your breath*, breathing in a slow, relaxed manner. Notice the rhythm of your breath, the sensation of air entering and exiting your body, the slight increase of tension as you inhale and release as you exhale. It is likely your attention will wander—to tinnitus, to thoughts about tinnitus, to any other concern. Notice these lapses as they occur and gently, *neutrally* return to your breath.
- Finally, using your breath as an “anchor”, return your attention to your experience as a whole, gently allowing tinnitus, any other sensations, thoughts and feelings, to occur in the present moment, without criticism and judgment.



As you move back into your life, remember to bring this calm, accepting attitude with you, returning often to your breath to soften any distress.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Tinnitus

(continued from page 13)

have limited, or in most cases, no direct control over the sounds and sensations. Until we find a cure, wishing tinnitus will stop only feeds hypervigilance and starves recovery. You can't change tinnitus, but you can change your inner relationship with the sounds of tinnitus. Research suggests that acceptance—willingly sharing your space with tinnitus—aids in recovery from tinnitus distress.

The benefits of acceptance are clear: You stop banging your head against the tinnitus wall and instead free up energy to go around it. You relinquish attempts to control tinnitus in exchange for the confidence of knowing you can handle it. You come to find that tinnitus is not the boogey man you have imagined. It is just a meaningless collection of auditory signals that have no direct bearing on the true value of your life.

Sharing space with an intruder as invasive as tinnitus is a courageous, noble endeavor. Studies show that mindfulness can help. Mindfulness is the practice of taking a more neutral, objective stance toward tinnitus, to soften your emotional response, making it easier to take the next step in your recovery.

Exposure: Rejoining Your Life

The most natural response to emotional distress is to avoid experiences that trigger it. Disruptive in its own right, tinnitus-induced avoidance can lead to more serious conditions, like panic disorder, phobia, and depression. The ultimate goal of CBT for tinnitus is the return to a healthy lifestyle by resuming the activities that bring happiness and meaning. Exposure is the process of gradually reversing avoidance, reintroducing yourself to sound, to silence, and to the activities you may have formerly believed to be forever tarnished by tinnitus.

Exposure is a whole brain workout, enlisting each of your new CBT skills—careful thinking, acceptance, and mindfulness—to sand the edge off your distress and make it easier to engage your new soundscape, a new, valued life, even with tinnitus.

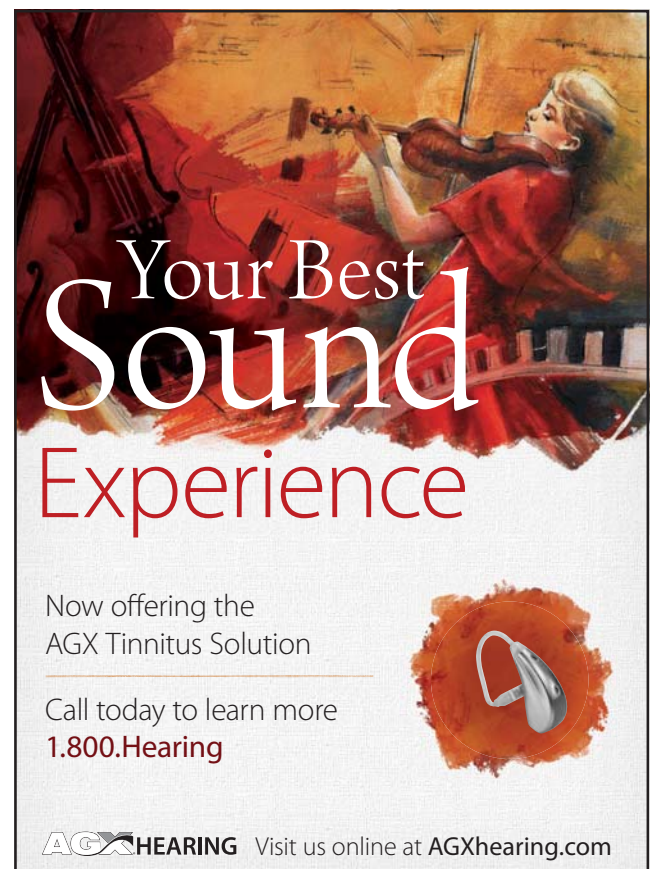
Recovery from tinnitus distress requires hard work, persistence and time. My own experience with tinnitus and CBT took many months and, admittedly, I had my own share of setbacks. But over time I noticed the sounds of my tinnitus fading into the background. Now I rarely notice my tinnitus, and when I do, it is without the debilitating emotional weight it once carried. Sweet habituation!

Bruce Hubbard, Ph.D. is a Licensed Psychologist, an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University and Director of the Cognitive Health Group in New York City. To learn more about Dr. Hubbard's experience with tinnitus and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, visit www.cbtfortinnitus.com.

Looking for a CBT Specialist?

Use ATA's online Tinnitus Health Professional Listing to find a provider in your area.


Get started at www.ATA.org/provider-search



Your Best
Sound
Experience

Now offering the
AGX Tinnitus Solution

Call today to learn more
1.800.Hearing



AGX HEARING Visit us online at AGXhearing.com

Advertisement — ATA does not endorse or recommend any tinnitus products or treatments.