



# Turning the Tide

## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Severe Tinnitus Distress

By Bruce Hubbard, PhD

**The greatest challenge for anyone** stressed by tinnitus is that, at present, there is no reliable method to reduce or remove the sound. This leaves many of us with the tragic belief that, if we are suffering this much now and there is no cure, then we are doomed to suffer forever. This dire belief can drive severe emotional distress—*anxiety, despair, sadness, panic*. Attention is glued to tinnitus. Basic functions, like

sleep, concentration, and relaxation, are substantially impaired.

I consider this a state of *severe tinnitus distress*. I know the condition well. Twenty years ago, when my tinnitus started, I was trapped in this state for six months. Since then, my tinnitus hasn't changed, but I've gone on to enjoy a full, valued life, free of the emotional and attentional burden of tinnitus. In my tinnitus treatment and coaching practice, I've met with countless people trapped in a state of severe tinnitus distress. In this article,

I describe some of the key strategies to help us break away and take back our lives from tinnitus.

### Stages of Recovery from Tinnitus Distress

For most people, having tinnitus gets easier over time. This is because the brain can adapt and habituate to the sounds. Habituation is a natural neurological process through which the emotional and attentional burden of tinnitus gradually recedes. While most people habituate naturally to tinnitus, others need help.

I view severe tinnitus distress as the *first stage in a gradual process of adapting to tinnitus and recovering from tinnitus distress*. The stages of adaptation to tinnitus were described by psychologist Richard Hallam in the 1980s (see page 33 for the adapted

***“If you want to feel better, stop banging your head against the immovable wall of tinnitus and learn to navigate around it!”***

version). You can see from these stages that over time it can get easier, often a lot easier, to live with tinnitus.

## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

The most established methods for promoting recovery from tinnitus distress are cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and its close cousin Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). These approaches consist of psychological skills, including mindfulness, for effectively handling strong emotions, intrusive thoughts, and stressors like tinnitus. The goal of these approaches is not to change tinnitus, but to change how we respond and relate to tinnitus. These techniques reduce tinnitus importance and help us redirect attention to adapting and moving on.

## Getting the Right Help

If you are in a state of severe tinnitus distress, it's unlikely that you will find sufficient benefit from a CBT smartphone app or from an audiologist or tinnitus coach who claims to provide CBT. You will probably need the *real deal*. CBT and ACT are behavioral health treatments provided by qualified behavioral health professionals. These listings may help you locate someone who could help:

### CBT and ACT

- <https://findyourtherapist.adaa.org/>
- <https://www.abct.org/get-help/>

### ACT

- <https://contextualscience.org/>

## Develop a Recovery Perspective on Your Tinnitus

The cognitive part of CBT is based on the principle that *how we think* about problems can have a strong influence on *how we feel and behave*. You'll want to be sure, then, that your beliefs and expectations about a life with tinnitus are accurate and helpful. Learning about habituation, reading habituation success stories, and using the stages of recovery to gauge your progress can help to instill hope and propel you into Stage Two. And here are a few important facts that contradict the "gloom and doom" perspective and provide a much more hopeful way of thinking about a future with tinnitus:

- Surveys show that most people aren't bothered by their tinnitus.
- Studies have found that how bothered a person is by their tinnitus has little or nothing to do with the volume, pattern, pitch, and type of sound.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Most people who are bothered at first are less bothered over time.
- Completing a CBT or ACT program can significantly reduce tinnitus distress and start you on a path to recovery.

## Stop Trying to Control Your Tinnitus

The key to promoting recovery and habituation is to reduce the importance you place on your tinnitus. Attempts to control tinnitus, persistent complaints about tinnitus, constant masking and running away from tinnitus may help temporarily.

But these responses may have the unintended consequence of keeping tinnitus important. This has the paradoxical effect of triggering the brain's protective alarm system that drives anxious (or annoyed) attention to tinnitus. It follows, then, that *the more we stress about hearing our tinnitus, the more we will hear our tinnitus*.

Dropping the struggle calms the brain's alarm system and reduces anxiety and anxious attention to tinnitus. It's a practical choice that individuals struggling with tinnitus can make when they feel they've come to the end of their rope in trying to reduce or remove their tinnitus and they are willing to try the radical alternative of letting tinnitus do what it does, sound like it does, come and go as it does, without fighting and catastrophizing it. Realizing that you don't have to control your tinnitus, to get rid of it, to hide from it, can be a great relief. It promotes habituation and frees up resources that can be redirected toward adapting and moving on.

In my case, I struggled with tinnitus for six months, desperate for the sounds to stop. I changed my diet, took supplements, and reduced my stress. But for me, the sounds, and my despair, only got worse. To this day, I am grateful that I committed to dropping my struggle with tinnitus. This was the choice that kicked off my full recovery. If you want to feel better, stop banging your head against the immovable wall of tinnitus and learn to navigate around it!

## Try Self-Guided Sound Enrichment

Sound enrichment is the oldest, quickest form of tinnitus relief. It is the active ingredient in all audiologist-directed *sound therapy* programs. However, sound therapy can be expensive and, in my opinion, is not always necessary. There are plenty of excellent options for *self-guided sound enrichment*. Open-ear Bluetooth devices are available, as are Bluetooth “sleep headphones” for use in bed. YouTube is a great source for finding helpful sounds, or you can download the ReSound Relief app (<https://www.resound.com/en-us/hearing-aids/apps/relief>), a free smartphone app with lots of sounds, relaxation exercises, and more. Just be sure to keep the volume of the sound enrichment below the level of your tinnitus. In this way you are continuing to provide the healthy exposure to tinnitus your brain needs to adapt and habituate.

In the context of a CBT or ACT program, you won't need to rely on sound enrichment 24/7. You'll be learning and applying more powerful strategies to help coexist effectively with tinnitus when you hear it. Instead, the use of sound enrichment is generally limited to quieter, stiller settings, such as sleep, concentration, and relaxation. Like a crutch for a broken leg, sound enrichment can be tapered off as habituation and recovery progress.

## Commit to Resuming a Full Life

It's a common misunderstanding that the key ingredient in CBT is

to change our thinking. This refers to an outdated version of CBT that was popular in the 1990s. Today CBT and ACT emphasize *changing our behavior* to promote healthy thoughts and feelings. When it comes to tinnitus, my motto is: *behave like yourself again to feel like yourself again*. This is often hard at first and requires a willingness to experience some anxiety as you courageously turn your focus away from tinnitus and back to living fully. CBT and ACT teach strategies to help handle these emotions effectively as we resume our full lives.

## Supplement Your Recovery with Medication for Anxiety and Insomnia

CBT and ACT are evidence-based interventions for anxiety and insomnia. However, *when the symptoms are severe*, we often supplement these behavioral strategies with medications that help take the edge off our pain and make it easier to get ahead. My article “Assessing and Treating Tinnitus-Related Anxiety and Insomnia,” which ran in the Summer 2023 issue of *Tinnitus Today*, describes common medications that can help. The literature indicates the medications are unlikely to worsen tinnitus. Medication must be used responsibly, in close communication with the prescribing physician. Reducing anxiety and improving sleep have great potential to help you manage the effects of tinnitus.

## Conclusion

When trapped in severe tinnitus distress, it may seem impossible to ever be well again. But take heart, there are effective strategies for helping us break out of the tinnitus trap. My hope is that the advice provided here will get you started on your path to a full recovery! 🦋



*On developing tinnitus distress in 2005, Bruce Hubbard, an experienced clinical psychologist, turned for help to the only evidence-based treatment, cognitive*

*behavioral therapy (CBT). Following his recovery, Dr. Hubbard founded CBT for Tinnitus, LLC, to provide global access to online training and coaching to people struggling with tinnitus distress and tinnitus education for professionals. He has published numerous articles and podcasts on CBT, mindfulness, and tinnitus. His webinar, Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Tinnitus, sponsored by the Anxiety & Depression Association of America (ADAA), has received close to 400,000 views.*

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## References

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