

Navigating the Internet to Promote Tinnitus Habituation

By Bruce Hubbard, PhD

Among the internet's greatest contributions to the public is improved access to health information. Gone are the days when a local doctor was your only source of guidance. With tinnitus, for which the typical prognosis is "There's nothing I can do, you'll just have to live with it," it's not surprising that many people turn to Drs. Google, Yahoo, and Bing for additional help!

Yet greater access to information and resources about tinnitus can come with a downside: The more information you get, the harder it is to separate what helps from what may hurt. For someone in the throes of tinnitus distress, the internet is a place where desperate need meets a torrent of unregulated products, amateurs presenting as experts, and well-meaning fellow sufferers who (stuck in a struggle with their own tinnitus) will enthusiastically advise you on how to handle yours. It's not unusual for someone visiting tinnitus-related websites to find that, as



a result, their tinnitus is more pronounced. As one patient put it: "You have to plow and sift through multiple posts of negativity, misery, and misinformation to connect to someone who can truly help."

Many healthcare professionals advise their patients to stay off tinnitus-related websites entirely. In this day and age, this seems unrealistic. We know that people with tinnitus, particularly in areas where direct resources aren't available, are driven to find meaningful connections and valid answers through the internet. But how do you separate fact from fiction, friend from foe?

In this article, I draw on my experience and expertise as a cognitive behavioral therapist to suggest some guidelines for deciding how best to seek information and support through tinnitus-related websites.

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1. Be an educated user of tinnitus forums.

What *you* think and believe about your tinnitus will strongly affect your present and future course. This age-old principle is at the core of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for tinnitus. Exposure to gloom-and-doom accounts, horror stories, and misinformation — especially when a person is at their most vulnerable — can reinforce the hopeless belief that there can be no productive, enjoyable life with tinnitus. My work as a cognitive behavioral therapist often begins by undoing the damage caused by exposure to inaccurate, negative messaging gleaned from even the most well-meaning tinnitus websites. In CBT, we work to base our judgments and expectations about tinnitus on facts. But how can a layperson, desperate for help, tell the difference between good information and bad?

First, visit websites that are most likely to publish reliable facts about tinnitus, its causes, and progression. Armed with the basics, you will be in a better position to dismiss inaccurate information when you see it. The following websites can be considered reliable sources on tinnitus and habituation:

- American Tinnitus Association (ATA): <https://www.ata.org/understanding-facts>
- British Tinnitus Association (BTA): <https://www.tinnitus.org.uk/>
- The BTAs “Take on Tinnitus:” <https://takeontinnitus.co.uk/>

2. Avoid websites, products, and people that claim they can make your tinnitus go away.

At present, there are no scientifically validated treatments for reducing or eliminating the sounds of tinnitus. Yet this does not stop people from experimenting with countless supposed remedies recommended through tinnitus websites and forums. Whether you choose to pursue such strategies is a personal choice. But, if your goal is habituation, be forewarned: It will only hold you back. Searching for a cure that may not exist keeps you negatively tuned into your tinnitus: Is it getting better? Is it getting worse? It reinforces the dangerous belief that if tinnitus is present, there can be no peace.

Habituation is the opposite of trying to make your tinnitus go away. In pursuing habituation, you stop trying to change your tinnitus. Instead, you focus your efforts on changing your response to tinnitus by treating tinnitus as an unimportant sound and

redirecting your attention and energy back to the important stuff in your life. Over time, tinnitus is recategorized by the brain as just another meaningless sound that can be screened out and forgotten.

3. Find and utilize information from websites that focus on habituation.

If your goal is habituation, then you will be best served by restricting your search to information and advice on how to adjust to your tinnitus. The following resources are recommended:

- On his “Tinnitus Corner,” noted expert Dr. Stephen Nagler offers a deep reservoir of practical advice on habituation: www.Tinn.com
- A thorough description of CBT and habituation can be found in my webinar <https://www.cbtfortinnitus.com/webinar> and website www.CBTforTinnitus.com
- Tinnitus author Glenn Schweitzer hosts a website devoted to habituation: <https://rewiringtinnitus.com>

4. On tinnitus forums, seek advice on habituation from people who have achieved it.

Someday, there may be a tinnitus forum titled “Our Tinnitus Hasn’t Gone Away, But We’re Doing Great!

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