

Just One Sound



by *Barbara Griswold*

Tinnitus has been a very noisy part of my life for eight years – ever since the day I changed the battery in a smoke detector and the unthinkable occurred: The alarm went off next to my ear. It all happened in a split second.

At first, I felt alone, very scared. How could I explain to my family what was raging inside my head? I knew they couldn't relate (how could they?) to the sound of a whistling teakettle sometimes, and a jet engine at other times. There were days when it was faint; other days when it roared with a vengeance. Sometimes in the shower I thought it was gone. But then the shower was done, and the tinnitus dominated again.

I used to think my experience was unique, but I was wrong. Through the American Tinnitus Association, I found a network of wonderful people ready to share their stories, people who understand whistling teakettles and jet engine sounds. I came to realize that lots of people live with tinnitus every day, and that there are many ways to cope with it – and cope with it well.

For me, the key was letting tinnitus become a part of my life. I tell myself that it's only as loud as I perceive it to be. Changing the way I think about the tinnitus is not always easy to do, but it can work.

When I hear the noise, I say, "Okay, it's here," but then move on and listen for other sounds in the environment that are special to me.

Such as music. When I concentrate on music, almost any kind, the tinnitus is pushed to the background. When riding in a car, which I find relaxing, I listen to CDs, the radio, and other cars passing by. All of those sounds help cover my tinnitus. My good friend John, who also has tinnitus, has a special sound, too – the chirping of crickets – that helps him. He loves to sit outside in the summertime and let the crickets drown out the noise inside his head.

An environmental sound machine that produces the sounds of ocean waves helps me fall asleep, although playing it at night keeps my family up. I recently discovered that when my big, black dog Sheeba crawls under my bed, falls asleep, and begins to snore, her snoring is more welcomed than the tinnitus. Sheeba has become my masking device!

It's important that I continue to do what I enjoy: going to the movies, concerts, dancing, and having dinner with friends. In appropriate situations, I make sure I use my custom-made earplugs for protection. And I know to not use earplugs too much so I don't become overly sensitive to normal sounds.

For many years, I blamed myself for this injury. I used to think that if I had been more informed, more cautious, more observant, things would have turned out differently. But I know there is no blame. It just happened. I've forgiven myself, and I've moved on.

I've learned to share with other people and accept their help when it's given. I've learned to listen – really listen – to all the sounds that are out there. I appreciate more sounds now, like that of falling rain, of ocean waves crashing onto shore, of my shower, and of my snoring dog. All of these sounds help me know that tinnitus is just one sound. As annoying as it can be, it is only one sound.

Maybe one day you'll discover your special sound. Maybe it's the sound of crickets on a summer's evening. Maybe that'll be the best sound you've ever heard. I know my friend John feels that way. ☺

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