

Can there be without

by Lars Johansson

I remember February 6, 2002 very well. It was the day silence came to an end.

I woke up and went to work that day like I had so many days before. Was there a hint of tinnitus in the morning? I don't remember. What I *do* remember is that by the afternoon I had a screaming noise in my left ear. I was having coffee with my colleagues, but I could barely hear them over the noise in my head. I panicked.

The first two physicians I saw knew nothing about tinnitus and said nothing could be done about it. Their only advice was, "Just don't listen to it." Fortunately, I soon discovered that not all doctors were as ignorant as those two were.

Like most people with tinnitus, I have tried to figure out what caused it. I know that I had been overworked for at least a year and that I had started to become very worried about my dad's cancer. I had shown other signs of burnout and stress before that dark February day in 2002, but I ignored the signs. Would I be free of tinnitus if I had listened to the signals my body was sending? Maybe.

Three or four months before the onset of my tinnitus, I'd read an article about the condition in a magazine. Before that, I had very little understanding of tinnitus, just like most people who are not affected by it. I have a vivid memory of reading the article: It freaked me out. I thought to myself that it sounded absolutely horrible, and I hoped I'd never get it.

Two years after the debut of my persistent noise, I learned that my case of tinnitus was most likely caused by Ménière's disease. When I started reading about that condition, I stumbled across a study in which Ménière's was described as one of the most debilitating non-fatal diseases. But I decided to not let that get me down. Staying positive and hopeful, I felt, would make a difference.



peace quiet?

Since the onset, my tinnitus has varied a lot in tone and perceived volume. I always have a high-pitched hiss, although it's worse some days. I also periodically get a low-pitched buzz accompanied by fullness in my ear. There are hours when it suddenly turns into a screaming siren, making it almost impossible to hear anything through my good ear, let alone the bad ear. The siren can be so loud that it's almost physically painful. On days like that, I keep busy and tell myself that better days will come. I remind myself about the people who love me and the people whom I love. I can't quit. I won't quit. I'm not going to let my tinnitus defeat me. Living with tinnitus is not easy. You have to be a fighter.

Eventually a better period comes again, and my quality of life increases by so much that it's hard to believe. But it does improve. I've been there several times. There has always been a light at the end of this tunnel. I don't always see it, but it's there, like the sun shining above the clouds.

To feel better, I have learned to focus on what makes me feel good. I sure wish I didn't have tinnitus. But now that I do, I try to make the best of the situation. By reminding myself about what is important in life, the meaning of life becomes clearer. My interest in helping others is bigger than ever. And, for me, family comes before material things. What helps me make it through rough days is thinking about the people who care about me and whom I hold dear. I don't know where I'd be without them, and I can never thank them enough.

Besides nurturing relationships, my advice to others with tinnitus is to nurture your hobbies. Do you like writing? Write. Do you enjoy taking photos? Take photos. Do you like bowling? Bowl. Do you like making crafts? Make crafts. You get the idea. The better you feel in general, the higher the quality of life you will have despite tinnitus. This is the time to pick up an old passion that has been pushed aside for too long. Some days with tinnitus can be a struggle. Try to make it less hard by emphasizing the good things in life.

I am not going to give in to the screaming monster. I believe we can beat tinnitus if we stick together. With the help of people who donate their time and money, we can raise awareness and money for research. Maybe you can't donate \$10,000, but perhaps you could spare \$10. Or you could print and distribute awareness posters; write to politicians, physicians, researchers, or pharmaceutical companies; or talk to people about tinnitus. There is always something you can do. If you cannot donate money, donate time.

There will be a cure someday. However, we do not know how long it will take. But with your help, the wait may become shorter. *A train of positive-ity* is heading toward the light at the end of the tunnel. Are you aboard? 🚂

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