

Tinnitus and Relationships



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Chronic illness will test anyone's mettle. And pain aside, illness can send a patient into an emotional tailspin and often send loved ones right along with. Over time, chronic illness can

tear some relationships apart, straining couples financially and causing the caretaker to resent the loss of enjoyable pastimes in favor of caring for the ill partner.

Miraculously, illness brings some couples closer together as it puts life into sharper and more precious perspective. A loved one's illness, in most cases, evokes a natural empathy from family members and friends.

Then there's tinnitus. Neither a disease nor a visible injury, tinnitus has a bit of a PR problem when it comes to generating compassion for the havoc it can wreak. It has no attending artifacts — no cast or wheelchair, no gaping wound or outward scar. It's a hard sell when you're looking for understanding; a harder sell still when you're looking for love.

Whether you're single, divorced, life-long married, with children or without, your relationships or relationship potential can be impacted by tinnitus. It's hard to attract a potential partner — or for that matter be appealing to one's current partner — when a lack of sleep leaves you irritable or when a legitimate need to avoid loud noise (which can make tinnitus worse) puts the brake on social activities. Many tinnitus singles are uncomfortable about having to explain their activity limitations — no concerts, no noisy restaurants, no movies — to a first-time date and don't want to be seen as a difficult person to entertain. A relationship is challenging enough to nurture without additional stressors like tinnitus thrown in. While it can't be blamed for all of life's problems, tinnitus can make a tough thing tougher.

I've talked with several people — on both sides of the marital fence — about their tinnitus and its impact on their love lives. Their frank comments, which I share with their permission, show the common as well as unique experiences in the complex world of tinnitus and relationships.



Mari Quigley is 51 and divorced, and was divorced for many years before her unilateral (one-sided) tinnitus and hearing loss started in 1995. For her, tinnitus was a warning signal of an acoustic neuroma, a benign auditory nerve tumor, which she had surgically removed in 1998. The tinnitus and hearing loss remained after surgery.

I asked Mari if tinnitus affected her relationships — dating, family, work. She was emphatic: "Tinnitus has affected every part of my life. Working is difficult because tinnitus gets in the way of my hearing. Plus it makes me anxious and impatient at times. My family has been very supportive. And so have the men I've met — except for the man I was dating when I first got tinnitus. It was already a dysfunctional relationship — full of stress that made my tinnitus much worse."

Mari continued: "Now I explain to my dates about tinnitus, and most of the time it doesn't bother them that I need a quiet restaurant and so forth. Sometimes, though, I feel like I'm complaining. But I figure that I'm setting a good example about how important it is to take care of our hearing."

Would people with tinnitus have better success in relationships if they dated others with tinnitus? "Yes," she said, "because both people would have a clear perspective of the condition. But this is not just about dating. It's about having friends who really understand." That's one reason why she started a tinnitus support group in California four years ago: "to stop thinking about myself and to help others, which is what life is supposed to be all about."

David Pearl is in his 30s and single. He has had tinnitus, hyperacusis (a super-sensitivity to sound), and other ear disorders since he attended two concerts in 1996.

David explained his situation: "Because of tinnitus and hyperacusis, I've had to decline so many social activities. For me, there are no plays, movies, nightclubs, symphonies, loud restaurants or bars, bowling alleys, athletic events, wedding receptions, or even loud religious services." For David, the emotional cost is also high: depression, anxiety, fear, anger, a feeling of vulnerability, and loneliness. "I'm an outgoing, extroverted person," he stated, "so there's a constant disconnect

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RIDE with Sid! BREAK the TINNITUS CYCLE



ATA's new Chair, Sid Kleinman, will bicycle through six states, for a total of over 1,000 miles. The ride will begin on September 22, 2002 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and finish October 3, 2002 in Memphis, Tennessee.

Sid's philosophy is that "everyday is a gift," and that people living with tinnitus can participate in all that life has to offer. To assist in managing his tinnitus, Sid shortens his emotional focus to 20 minutes at a time. His passion for cycling also helps him manage his tinnitus.

You may have already received the *Ride with Sid: Break the Tinnitus Cycle* mailing from ATA highlighting Sid's trip. The goal of his trip is threefold:

- 1) to raise awareness of tinnitus,
- 2) to raise money for ATA,
- 3) to show that a person can experience tinnitus and still live a full life.

Take a moment to support Sid by making a contribution to ATA today. You can do this online at www.ata.org or by enclosing a check or credit card number in the envelope provided in the mailing. Act today!

During the course of the trip, Sid will follow the Mississippi River through Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, and Tennessee. Watch ATA's Web site for updates on his location during the ride.

Thank you to our Gold Level Sponsors — Cochlear America and Phonak USA—for supporting Sid and the American Tinnitus Association. ☒



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between my personality and interests and the reality of my physical restrictions." He continues to search for a soul mate who will accept his limitations and disorders.

Brian Woolsey, age 45, lives with his wife, Karen, and their two young sons. His tinnitus started after a firecracker exploded near his ear when he was 12 years old.

I asked Brian how Karen reacted to his tinnitus when they were first dating. He said, "For years I'd thought of myself as being less than others, as somehow defective, because of tinnitus. But it didn't affect me that way with Karen. It was my inner perception that saw tinnitus as a defect. She was completely accepting of tinnitus — and everything else about me."

"Do you think that people with tinnitus would find more relationship success if they dated others with the same condition?" I asked. He answered, "I think they'd be more successful if they found people with whom they could put everything on the table without fear. If my wife had tinnitus, too, I could see us bringing each other down. On the other hand, I see an

advantage to dating someone who also has tinnitus: a type of empathy you won't find anywhere else."



I know this for fact: A non-tinnitus person cannot comprehend the riveting grip that a constant sound in the ears can have. But added closeness in a relationship between someone with and someone without can be a byproduct: My husband's loving worry about my tinnitus made my journey *our* journey. Many of ATA's support groups are run by couples where one spouse's support of the other spouse is so total that we're not sure which one in the couple has tinnitus.

Tinnitus and its attending problems need to be discussed openly with the people in our lives. One, it's a way to educate the world about the condition. And two, open discussions can help sort out the people who are not interested in sticking around for the ride — and find those who are. I am convinced that there are enough good people in the world who can understand tinnitus without experiencing it, who will accommodate for it, and who will love us anyway. ☒