

4 STAGES OF HABITUATION

People struggling with tinnitus often find it hard to believe that anyone could habituate to tinnitus as intrusive as theirs. Yet studies show that habituation occurs with all types of tinnitus, regardless of volume, pattern, or pitch. These stages of habituation, proposed by British psychologist Richard Hallam, describe the typical course of habituation. They offer a vision of what to expect, and a yardstick to gauge progress.

STAGE

1

- Persistent awareness of tinnitus, except during sleep and masking by louder sounds.
- Frequent worrying and depressing thoughts about tinnitus.
- Difficulty concentrating for more than a few minutes.
- Absorbing activities provide only slight distraction.
- Insomnia severe (if present). Chronic sleep loss, in some cases, necessitates medication.

STAGE

2

- Intermittent lack of awareness of tinnitus, especially during absorbing activities. There are times when tinnitus is tuned out.
- Improvement in concentration reflected in increasing engagement in normal activities.
- Beginnings of emotional acceptance; the implications of tinnitus no longer seem catastrophic.
- Gradual return to normal sleep pattern (if disturbed).

STAGE

3

- Awareness of tinnitus mainly limited to periods of fatigue, stress, or quiet.
- Noises intrude mainly when listening and mental concentration are important.
- Noises annoying rather than emotionally distressing.

STAGE

4

- Attention rarely given to the tinnitus. Attention limited to periods when it's louder than normal or you are reminded of it.
- Noises do not intrude into normal activities.
- Emotional acceptance achieved — tinnitus neither pleasant nor unpleasant.