

Am I hearing things (you don't) ????

About 5 years ago I started to notice a ringing in my ears. This is not a debilitating condition and I have learned to tune it out. More disturbing however is an inability to tolerate high frequency "Noise". An example would be the sound of plates clanging against each other as you remove them from the dishwasher. This type of sound feels somewhat painful. At the RMAF last month after day one I found I could no longer listen to anything and enjoy it as my ears felt fatigued. (stayed too long at Raidho). I had a pair of ear plugs but failed to employ them at all times. Normally I listen at an average of 70 db. per my free phone app readings. I seem to notice during quiet moments a very low frequency off and on rumble sound. I thought it might be a piece of equipment in the home so I shut everything down, walked outside around all sides of the home thinking it might be emanating from a neighbor. No go. Its in my head. At age 60+ I have probably been subjected to my share of excessive noise but have never been an artillery man or Navy Gunner for example.

Anyone else have similar experiences?

Yes, I share your experience.

It's called "hyperacusis." A collapsed tolerance of sound, where sounds not normally perceived as "loud" by other people are perceived as loud by you. And usually this tends to occur in certain frequency ranges, typically upper frequencies, in just the range of clanging dishes as you describe. (Clanging dishes are a classic problem area for people with hyperacusis).

That is almost certainly the condition you are describing. Though you would be best advised to go to an ENT to be checked out to make sure it's not being caused by something that needs to be taken care of.

But if your experience is like many with this rare condition, you will be told you have hyperacusis by the ENT. Unfortunately that's often where ENT's stop, saying "sorry you have it, you are on your own."

Fortunately there are people who know more about it. A good audiologists can tell you more and suggest strategies, though I'd say it's even better to seek out audiologists trained specifically in treating tinnitus and hyperacusis.

The reason I am familiar with all this is that I have had loud tinnitus for decades, with bouts of hyperacusis. Hyperacusis first hit me around 2001 when I was doing sound effects for a fantasy TV show, creating the sound of a giant lizard hissing. I started to notice the hissing sounds I was working with were really irritating my ears. I didn't think much of it until I got home and then it seemed everything, especially in the upper frequencies, seemed loud and irritating. Literally turning the pages of a book, the sound of my fingers rubbing the paper, "stuck out" to my ears in an annoying way. Same with dishes, cutlery, even the sibilance in people's voices. Even watching TV was hard.

Suffice to say...it was pretty depressing. And the natural thing to do was research, which led to on-line tinnitus/hyperacusis groups, where I read about the problems and potential therapies.

Even back then there was a potential therapy for both tinnitus and hyperacusis. For tinnitus it was called "Tinnitus Retraining Therapy" or "TRT." It was based on the theory that ringing came from the brain's

reaction to ringing caused by hearing damage (even a tiny bit of damage) and that the noise was linked to the brain's more primitive "fight or flight" and emotional responses, which are heightened and disturbed by the noise. Which is why tinnitus ringing is actually seen as a threat to the mind, even though the same volume of noise in the environment is not seen as a threat.

So the brain has to be "re-programmed" to not see tinnitus as a threat.

The therapy involves both cognitive therapy (counseling sessions to help ways of not reacting to tinnitus) and sound therapy. In the sound therapy, often little noise generators, like hearing aids, pump very quiet white noise in to the ear just below the level of the person's tinnitus tone. What this does is give the brain a constant environmental stimulus right near the tone of the tinnitus (though not totally masking the tinnitus).

Over time, due to the plasticity of our brain, it "re-wires" to not see the tone as a threat including your tinnitus. After the therapy, the tinnitus is not "cured" in the sense the ringing has been removed. But rather you are habituated and no longer notice it (which, in practice, amounts to the ringing not really being there - you don't perceive it when you don't notice it).

A similar therapy is used for hyperacusis.

In that case, again it's a combination of counseling and sound therapy.

In hyperacusis, they theory says, your hearing FEELS damaged, but it is not. This is shown by the fact that when you test most people with hyperacusis their hearing is fine...if not even better than most people's hearing.

Rather, in hyperacusis, the theory goes that the brain has been stimulated at some point - often by exposure to noise (short and loud, or longer exposure to loud noise) to "turn up the volume." Usually this happens around the area of hearing decline or damage in a person. So if you have an audiology test and it shows a dip in your hearing, usually from noise exposure, you are most likely to be sensitive to sounds in that frequency range. The brain has "turned up" it's volume to try to hear in that range, making the affected frequencies sound extra loud, uncomfortable, even distorted or painful. And since our hearing is usually damaged a bit in the upper frequencies, that's usually the sensitivity in the hyperacusis sufferer.

In the therapy for hyperacusis, you do Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (counseling) to help understand your hearing is not in fact being damaged by sound, and to lower reaction to it. And you can additionally do sound therapy with the noise generators. They pump a quiet, pleasing white noise (actually personalized to the comfort of the individual's hyperacusis), which creates a constant stimulus. The noise is increased in volume over time, allowing the person to habituate and "re-wire" the unconscious part of the brain responsible for seeing noise as a threat.

I never did the TRT because I just habituated to my Tinnitus myself over time. It can sound really loud if I give it my attention, but I've been able to sleep fine over the years. Also, my hearing has always tested as quite good.

I also didn't choose to do the therapy for hyperacusis because for one thing it seemed more of an investment in time or money than I wanted to make (it can take up to 2 years of therapy). And fortunately I habituated over time and the hyperacusis essentially went away for most of the last 17 years, only making an occasional appearance but not lasting very long.

However, recently due to a very heavy, unforeseen exposure to loud noise, my hyperacusis showed up again, as bad as when I first got it.

This time I decided to not wait. I've found a local audiologists who specializes in the hyperacusis/tinnitus therapy and have just begun the therapy (wearing the noise generators as I type this).

The audiologist certainly seems confident we'll get good results, and in fact after only about a week in my hearing already seems to feel a bit better. So I'm feeling optimistic. (Which is also buoyed by the fact hyperacusis went away the first time).

So there you go: what I can tell you from my own experience.

Of course you shouldn't let anyone diagnose you over the internet and as I say, you should see at least an audiologist with your problem, if not an ENT first. And also, hyperacusis varies - you can get it and it just goes away after a week, or month or two. Or it can stick around a long time (without treatment). No way to know at this point whether yours (if you have it) will just pass or not I guess.

If I could leave you with any takeaway it would be this:

IF you have hyperacusis....

Be careful about doing too much research, of the type that sucks you in to the various discussion boards devoted to tinnitus and hyperacusis. The reasons are various. For one thing, tinnitus and hyperacusis are very much an "attention" phenomenon. The more attention you give it, the more you will be aware of and suffer from it. The other is that discussion boards tend to collect people who trade grievances with one another. In other words, they tend to self-select for those who still have the condition and are struggling with it; you don't see those who have habituated or put it behind them, because they tend to be just getting on with life, not inhabiting those discussion boards. So you can get a very depressing, sometimes "hopeless" sensation reading people just complaining about their hearing condition.

Finally, know that it is common for hyperacusis to get better over time. And if it doesn't, there are therapies available that supposedly work. (The audiologist I'm working with has been treating people for many years, with apparently a very high success rate).

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