

TINNITUS AND OUR EMOTIONS

by Lois N. Cohen, LCSW, ACSW, BCD

A tinnitus sufferer raised the question, "Is it alright to feel the way I feel?" It is not only alright, but imperative for our mental health! There are no right or wrong feelings. All of our emotions are real and valid.

Owning and being aware of our feelings enables us to know ourselves – our struggles, fears, joys, sorrows, our likes and dislikes, our values and goals. Our emotions enrich our lives.

Sometimes it is too painful to own all of our feelings, especially the negative ones. At these times, we try to deny or stifle them – and we do so at a price. For example, anger turned inward can lead to depression. When we suppress anger, frustration, resentment, hurt, or disappointment, we can feel exhausted and drained, and have little energy left for productive or enjoyable endeavors. Often our ability to concentrate, learn, and work is impaired.

When we suffer from a distressing and potentially debilitating disorder such as tinnitus, it is natural to experience a wide range of negative emotions and to ask, "Why me?" Acknowledging and expressing these feelings enables us to begin to move beyond the devastating impact tinnitus initially has on our lives.

The noises can be torturous and interfere with every aspect of our functioning – our work, our leisure, our relationships, and our sleep. How can we just take this in stride? It's like being invaded by a noisy alien! Many people feel that their lives have been turned upside down, and to feel anything but fury would be unbelievable. We need to, instead, allow ourselves the adjustment and mourning that is part of our tinnitus experience. It is quite normal to question why it happened and feel the injustice. This is especially

understandable when the tinnitus is accompanied by hearing loss which makes one's coping task even more difficult. Mourning the loss of the way we were or the dream of what we thought life would be will enable us to eventually embrace the present and move forward.

When we give ourselves permission to express anger about what happened to us, we begin to accept the reality of our situations. We can constructively express negative feelings in words by using "I feel..." messages. Stating our needs, like "I need to be seated at a quiet table in a restaurant" or asking people to face us when they talk, can help us socialize and follow our interests. Expressing our needs can lead to changes in our environments that can satisfy those needs.

Similarly, when we accept our fears we can begin to look at the thoughts upon which they are based and decide if the thoughts are valid or irrational. This is the cognitive therapy component that helps us resolve the worries and distress that make our noises louder. When we come to terms with a new self-image that accepts limitations and builds on strengths, we build the foundation for functioning fully once again.

In addition to tinnitus' potential to cause anxiety and depression, life's pre-existing stressors can exacerbate our tinnitus. Many tinnitus patients with whom I work struggle with additional difficulties, including marital, family and career problems, infertility, and losses. Although it is tempting to blame our loud noises for all of our suffering and pain, we also need to work on resolving our other dilemmas. Otherwise, life's unresolved crises will make the tinnitus worse and the vicious cycle will continue.

Our feelings are a gift from our hearts. They act as a barometer and compass to help us know what we need to do for ourselves. When we listen and understand our emotions, we can deal more effectively with them and take the necessary steps to improve our lives. Although we might not be able to control the loudness of our noises, we can control our reaction to them. When we learn to do this we can function more fully in the present while looking more optimistically to the future. ■

Lois N. Cohen, LCSW, ACSW, BCD is a psychotherapist in Northport, NY who has first-hand experience in learning to integrate tinnitus into her own life. She can be contacted at 631/754-6249