

Learn About Hearing Series:

Tinnitus
and
Musical Ear Syndrome

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Tinnitus and Musical Ear Syndrome

More articles in the series:

***Everything You Wanted to Know About Your Hearing Loss But Were Afraid to Ask
(Because You Knew You Wouldn't Hear the Answers Anyway!)***

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Tinnitus—What's That?

A person asked, "I've begun hearing an annoying buzzing or ringing sound in my ears. What's going on?"

The fancy name for the sounds you are hearing is tinnitus. Some people pronounce it "TIN-ih-tus" and others "tih-NYE-tus." Either way is correct. Both are in the dictionary.

The Phantom Strikes Again

Tinnitus is the word we use to describe hearing certain phantom sounds. Tinnitus is not a disease. Rather it is generally a symptom of something wrong in your auditory system. The dictionary defines tinnitus as the sensation of noise, often ringing or roaring, in your ears that comes from inside your head in the absence of any external sound.

Since there is normally no external sound corresponding to the sounds you are "hearing," tinnitus is truly a phantom sound. Your brain actually detects signals in your auditory system or in its own auditory circuits, and you perceive and "hear" them as real. Make no mistake about it; to you the phantom tinnitus sounds are just as real as any external sounds.

One person wrote his ear specialist, "Doctor, please confirm that this noise is not all in my head, and that I am not going mad."

The ear specialist wrote back, "With pleasure! You are not going mad! And yes, it is all in your head, but then, so are your ears!"

What Does Tinnitus Sound Like?

There are a variety of tinnitus sounds. Many people say their ears are ringing or buzzing (mine are ringing right now as I write this-as they have for decades). These are just two of the common tinnitus sounds. Your tinnitus may be a ringing, roaring, beating, clicking, banging, buzzing, hissing, humming, chirping, clanging, sizzling, whooshing, rumbling, whistling or dreadful shrieking noise. To some people, tinnitus sounds like rushing water, breaking glass, owls hooting or chain saws running.

About half the people with tinnitus only hear one tinnitus sound at a time. However, about one quarter of tinnitus sufferers hear two tinnitus sounds at the same time. For example, Ruby heard the roar of Niagara Falls in one ear and what sounded like a broken washing machine in her other ear after taking anti-cancer drugs. To me tinnitus is usually a high-pitched ringing or whine in my ears (much like a high-speed turbine running), and less often a soft shhh sound or a low rumbling noise. Pam hears what sounds like birds chirping and occasionally an owl hooting. When Una shakes her head she hears the pure tone “F “. The rest of the time she hears what sounds like a piece of sheet metal being hammered or a constant high-pitched tone.

About 16% of the people with tinnitus hear three or more tinnitus sounds at the same time. One poor lady, Mrs. P____, used to hear what sounded like a cow bell, a door bell, a tune, a noise like rushing water and a roaring like traffic in a tunnel—all at once.

Because of the variety of tinnitus sounds, sometimes people confuse it with another class of phantom sounds (auditory hallucinations) called Musical Ear syndrome. Tinnitus is always a simple sound. In contrast, Musical Ear syndrome sounds are more complex sounds such as voices, singing or music. (Read the eerie yet fascinating account of Musical Ear syndrome.)

Tinnitus comes in a variety of sounds, volumes and patterns. You may perceive its volume as ranging from subtle to shattering!

Your tinnitus may be constant. It may come and go. In one survey, 72% experienced their tinnitus all the time, 18% heard their tinnitus frequently and only 10% had occasional tinnitus.

About half the people with tinnitus hear their tinnitus in both ears at the same time. About 10% hear it in their left ear, and another 10% hear it in their right ear. For the remainder, they just hear their tinnitus inside their head somewhere.

At times tinnitus can be just plain weird. Occasionally other people may hear your tinnitus (objective tinnitus) as a clicking sound, just like you do. This kind of tinnitus occurs when a muscle in your ear contracts making this clicking sound.

A few people have a type of tinnitus that pulses with every heartbeat (pulsatile tinnitus). This kind of tinnitus results from a (big) artery too close to your middle ear.

Perhaps the weirdest kind of tinnitus is where people can change their tinnitus by doing ordinary, everyday things such as moving their eyes (gaze evoked tinnitus), moving their jaw (temporomandibular joint—TMJ), turning their head, applying pressure to parts of their bodies or even just by bending over which increases their blood pressure—and for them, their tinnitus.

Anita once told me, “When I move my eyes side to side or up and down the pitch of my tinnitus varies with my eye movement.” Neat, huh?—until it begins to really bother you. She added, “It also varies with the muscular movement of my jaw, like when eating. Opening and closing my mouth can make the pitch of my tinnitus vary too.”

How Common Is Tinnitus?

Tinnitus is relatively common. At least 17 out of every 100 people around the world have some degree of tinnitus. Here in the United States, the American Tinnitus Association estimates that about 50 million Americans have tinnitus to some degree while about 12 million have tinnitus severely enough that they seek medical advice. About 2 million of these have tinnitus so bad that they cannot function normally.

What Causes Tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a symptom, not a disease. Among the more common things that cause or trigger tinnitus are exposing your ears to loud sounds, taking various drugs, eating certain foods, hearing loss, allergies, stress and various ear conditions.

1. Loud Noise

Loud noise is the most common cause of preventable tinnitus. A study of 1,687 people with tinnitus revealed that noise exposure accounted for one out of four cases of tinnitus. Tinnitus from noise exposure and hearing loss generally go together. The American Tinnitus Association reports that up to 90% of all people with tinnitus have some level of noise-induced hearing loss. If you are around loud sounds for a while, perhaps you’ve noticed that your ears rang for a while after. This is tinnitus.

You may find that tinnitus occurs immediately after you have been exposed to a loud noise. Most often, you get mild, temporary tinnitus, but it may be permanent. The length of time your tinnitus lasts and its severity generally increases each time you expose your ears to loud noise. Finally, one day, if you continue to work, play or live around loud sounds, you may end up with permanent (and distressing) tinnitus, not to mention hearing loss.

This does not have to happen. You can protect yourself from noise-induced tinnitus. The choice is yours. All you need to do is avoid loud sounds or protect your ears from excessive noise by wearing ear protectors.

2. Prescription Drugs

The second most common cause of preventable tinnitus is from taking various prescription or non-prescription drugs. There are hundreds of these drugs in common use. The third edition of my book “Ototoxic Drugs Exposed” lists 529 drugs (and 29 chemicals) that are known to cause tinnitus. Such drugs can either cause tinnitus in the first place, make your existing tinnitus louder or cause a new tinnitus sound.

You can also download a 30-page listing of all the known (to me) drugs, herbals and chemicals that can cause tinnitus. It lists all the drugs in alphabetical order by their generic names and by their brand names. The brand new 2013 edition is called “Prescription Medications, Over-the-Counter Drugs, Herbs & Chemicals Associated with Tinnitus”. It’s in pdf format.

Tinnitus usually appears first as a continuous high-pitched sound. Often tinnitus precedes or accompanies hearing loss from ototoxic drugs. In fact, tinnitus is the number one indicator that you may be doing damage to your ears. It also may be the only warning you’ll ever get. Pay attention to it! If your ears start to ring after you begin taking any drug, you should immediately report this to your doctor. You and your doctor should then decide what to do-whether to reduce the dose, change the medication or stop taking that medication altogether.

3. Certain Foods

Specific foods such as red wine, grain-based spirits, cheese and chocolate can trigger or increase tinnitus in some people. Penny finds that wine, vinegar and certain spices affect the loudness of her tinnitus. She also finds that any foods containing mold will make her tinnitus louder.

Other things to beware of include caffeine, monosodium glutamate (MSG), nicotine, alcohol, marijuana and some spices. For example, Sue finds that eating hot spices such as chili peppers, hot salsa and hot paprika make her tinnitus louder. Some people find that just eating foods high in sugar makes their tinnitus louder.

4. Hearing Loss

Very often, hearing loss and tinnitus go hand in hand. Tinnitus does not cause hearing loss. Rather, it is the other way around. Hearing loss often results in tinnitus. The good news is that wearing hearing aids to correct the hearing loss often results in the tinnitus going away or fading into the background while you are wearing your hearing aids. Unfortunately, your tinnitus can come back at night when you remove your hearing aids to sleep.

5. Allergies

Allergies can also trigger tinnitus. Penny writes, “Allergies play a big part in the level of my tinnitus. I couldn’t walk into a library without having my tinnitus go off the charts—all because of dust.” She adds, “Many people have allergic reactions to things and don’t even know it’s allergy-related. They don’t connect what they ate with the level of their tinnitus, or what they smelled, or what plants they’re surrounded by, or if there’s mold out in their yard.”

6. Stress

Uncontrolled anxiety, stress and tension often make your tinnitus worse. Recent studies show that stress can also cause annoying tinnitus. Learning how to deal with the stress in your life can eliminate or greatly reduce tinnitus from this cause.

7. Ear Conditions

Certain ear conditions may also trigger tinnitus. For example, many people, including children, experience tinnitus along with a middle ear infection (otitis media) or a sinus infection. Generally, the tinnitus will lessen and gradually fade away once the infection clears up.

Other conditions that can trigger tinnitus include calcium build-up on the small bones in your middle ears (otosclerosis), pressure problems in the Eustachian tubes connecting your middle ears to your throat, an increase of fluid in your inner ears (Meniere’s disease) or any other condition that disturbs the fluid pressure in your inner

ears. In addition, tinnitus may be caused by tumors on your auditory nerves (acoustic neuroma), changes in the hair cells of your inner ears, poor nerve function due to pressure on them from surrounding tissues, operations on or around your ears, and even such simple things as wax (cerumen) build-up, foreign bodies or swelling in your ear canals. The truth is that almost anything that can go wrong with your ears or in your auditory system can trigger tinnitus.

The Effects of Tinnitus

The impact tinnitus has on a person's life can vary enormously. Obviously there is a major difference between mild or short lasting tinnitus and loud, severe, constant tinnitus day in and day out. Some people learn to completely ignore their tinnitus. The fancy term for this is "habituation." For many others, tinnitus is only a mild irritation. However, for some, tinnitus is totally debilitating and disrupts their entire life. People with severe tinnitus often have problems sleeping. They may be irritable and cannot concentrate on anything other than their tinnitus. As a result, they are constantly under stress, perform poorly, and lose their joy of living. The great musician, Beethoven, once lamented, "My ears whistle and buzz continually day and night. I can say I am living a wretched life."

What Can You Do About Tinnitus?

You do not have to let tinnitus drive you "buggy." There are a number of ways you can help yourself control your tinnitus. I've touched on five of these in this article—protect your ears from loud sounds, avoid tinnitus-producing medications, avoid certain foods, get your allergies under control and reduce your stress. There are many others.

Take charge of your tinnitus now. You don't have to let these phantom sounds control you.

To learn more about tinnitus and the many things you can do to help bring it under your control, see the sixth edition of our book *When Your Ears Ring—Cope with Your Tinnitus—Here's How*. (See ordering information at the back.)

The original of this article is on the Center's website at <http://hearinglosshelp.com/blog/tinnitus-whats-that/>.

Musical Ear Syndrome

The Phantom Voices, Ethereal Music & Other Spooky Sounds Many Hard of Hearing People Secretly Experience

Marilyn woke with a start, her heart pounding. It was the middle of the night. “I thought people were calling to me,” she explained. “I became truly frightened when I realized that I was deaf and should not be able to hear voices.”

“My wife hears music that is not there,” Harry writes. “The first song she heard was Silent Night sung by a very good choir of mostly men. It came in quite loud. A day later it was the Vienna Waltz over and over again so clear it was like being at a musical production.”

“I would often lie half awake in the quietness of the early morning and hear a phantom radio,” Dick recalls. “A guy would be talking like they did in the 50s. Kind of a monotone voice and all the advertisements like they did back then. It always sounded so real.”

“Late at night when I don’t have my hearing aids on,” Carolyn relates, “I am absolutely sure I hear trucks and bulldozers working right outside our bedroom windows. We are the only ones living on our little country lane. There’s no traffic of any kind outside my bedroom windows. My husband swears there are no noises at all.”

“Years ago,” Sherry remembers, “when my dad would take me flying in his little two-seater wind-knocker airplane, I used to hear strange music. The music sounded like the full Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Since I was quite young, I thought it was angels singing.”

Julie's father-in-law mainly hears loud music when alone in his apartment, oftentimes in the middle of the night. Julie explains, "He has taken to knocking on the downstairs landlady's door at 3 A.M. telling her to turn the music down. I have been with him a few times when he heard the music, but I couldn't hear a thing."

"I was afraid I was going nuts when I thought I was hearing things in my head after my CI surgery," Heather remembers. "On the morning after the surgery, I was hearing what sounded like music from a radio. I heard that every day from my surgery until I was hooked up. It almost drove me nuts. Yet, I never said one word to anyone about it because I didn't want them to think I was crazy."

Janet explained, "My mother-in-law confided in me about hearing music loud and clear at various times of the day, but frequently when she goes to bed. Two doctors now have basically ridiculed her and said they'd never heard of such a thing. My mother-in-law is at the end of her rope. She is even accusing her husband of trying to drive her crazy by playing this music. As you can imagine, this is very difficult on their marriage."

What do these people have in common? They all hear strange phantom sounds that no one else hears. They are also hard of hearing. Nor are they alone. Thousands of other hard of hearing people "hear" similar phantom sounds, yet they never tell a soul because they are afraid of the dreaded "H" word—hallucinations. The very word conjures up visions of phantom voices, padded cells and people in white coats talking in hushed tones. This is because almost everyone associates "hearing voices" with "going crazy" and mental illness such as schizophrenia. It's time to dispel such myths.

What Exactly Are Hallucinations?

According to Stedman's Medical Dictionary, hallucinations are "the apparent, often strong, subjective perception of an object or event when no such stimulus or situation is present." More simply put, hallucinations are where your brain perceives that something is happening even though your five senses have not received any direct stimulus.

Hallucinations may be visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), olfactory (smelling), gustatory (tasting) or tactile (feeling). Therefore, hallucinations are simply seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or feeling sights, sounds, odors, tastes, or sensations that no one else around you perceives.

Although hallucinations may occur with any of the five senses, auditory hallucinations are by far the most common kind of hallucination. A person is hearing auditory hallucinations when he or she hear noises, music, sounds or voices that no

one else hears because these phantom sounds are being generated in the person's brain, not externally.

Two Kinds of Auditory Hallucinations

Not many people know this, but there are actually two classes of auditory hallucinations—psychiatric auditory hallucinations, and non-psychiatric auditory hallucinations. People with mental illnesses often experience the former, while hard of hearing people often experience the latter.

Here is an example of a psychiatric auditory hallucination. Elyssa explained,

“Lately I’ve been hearing voices. I don’t know where they come from but they are loud and clear. Last week, for example, I was sitting in class when this voice told me that the boy sitting behind me was planning to attack me after school. I jumped out of my seat and began to scream obscenities at him. He denied everything, of course, so I punched him in the face and broke his nose.”

As you can readily see, this example is vastly different from the auditory hallucination stories mentioned at the beginning of this article—the kind many hard of hearing people typically experience. These non-psychiatric auditory hallucinations have nothing whatsoever to do with mental illness, but are a symptom of something not working quite right in the auditory circuits in our brains.

If you are hearing phantom sounds, how can you tell which of hallucinations you are experiencing—whether psychiatric or non-psychiatric? Although I am not a psychiatrist, here are two “rules of thumb”.

1. People who experience psychiatric auditory hallucinations generally hear voices, whereas people who experience non-psychiatric auditory hallucinations mostly hear music or singing, rather than just plain voices.

2. People who experience psychiatric auditory hallucinations generally hear clear and distinct voices either talking to or about them, and these voices may engage the person in conversation. Consequently, the content is of a meaningful personal nature.

In contrast, people who experience non-psychiatric auditory hallucinations often hear voices that sound vaguely like a radio broadcast or TV program playing in another room. For example, Robert explained, “I get Red Barber calling the game. I can’t distinguish the words—but I’m sure that’s who is talking.” Catherine described her

auditory hallucinations as “what sounded like the voice of a radio announcer on a badly tuned radio station”.

These phantom sounds do not contain any information of a meaningful personal nature. These voices neither talk to the person, or about them, nor do they engage them in conversation.

Characteristics of Auditory Hallucinations

Non-psychiatric auditory hallucinations (hereinafter referred to simply as “auditory hallucinations”) comprise a wide range of sounds, ranging from simple to complex. Simple sounds are single, unmodulated sounds such as the various tinnitus sounds (ringing, roaring, buzzing, hissing, rumbling, etc.) millions of people hear. In fact, tinnitus is the most common kind of auditory hallucination.

In contrast, complex sounds include multiple, modulated sounds such as tunes, singing, music and voices. These are the kinds of sounds that people have traditionally considered auditory hallucinations. Many people have mistakenly called these sounds “musical tinnitus”.

Depending on their clarity, phantom sounds may be either “unformed” or “formed.” Unformed auditory hallucinations consist of hearing distorted music, sounds, or voices. These sounds are vague, “fuzzy” and indistinct. For example, Jane described her unformed auditory hallucinations as “like the wind blowing, but with a musical quality, as if someone off in the distance was singing without words”. Rachel explains, “The words are never distinct—it’s like they are several rooms away”. Sarah relates, “I sometimes hear phantom ‘radio broadcasts’ that I can’t quite make out”.

In contrast, formed auditory hallucinations are where speech, music or singing is so clear and recognizable that people “hearing” such hallucinations can identify the various voices and musical instruments. For example, James explains, “For the past 3 to 4 months I have had the most calming and repetitive choruses and wind ensembles, usually led by a bass sax and a baritone playing and singing in a low octave, the older Christian hymns and a few oldies from the forties such as, Near the Cross, Amazing Grace, His Eye Is on the Sparrow and The Star Spangled Banner”.

Claudia, who has normal hearing, when describing her auditory hallucinations, wrote, “I hear passages of what sound like Strauss waltzes, Russian symphonies, Italian operas—distinctively enough to identify various instruments, male or female choruses, and the occasional soloist”.

Incidentally, many people find their auditory hallucinations begin with clearly-formed complete sentences or songs. Later, the repetition of lengthy passages of music may degenerate into short snatches of repetitive phrases or rhythmic patterns, or even into unformed auditory hallucinations that are more like the common forms of tinnitus. Tyler's father's auditory hallucinations followed this pattern. He explained, "My dad's musical hallucinations started out as recognizable songs (Battle Hymn of the Republic for 2 weeks, then started changing to a variety of other songs, The Music Man, Ride of the Valkyries, etc.) then turned into unrecognizable orchestral or vocal-like sounds".

The Need for a New Name—The Fear Factor

Unfortunately, the general public immediately associates all auditory hallucinations with mental illness. For example, if I say I hear non-psychiatric auditory hallucinations, typically you will zero in on the two words "psychiatric" and "hallucinations"—and immediately think I am crazy.

As a result, few people have the courage to admit they are hearing non-psychiatric auditory hallucinations for this very reason. For example, Cheryl explained, "I was afraid I was going nuts. I never said one word to anyone about the strange music I was hearing because I didn't want them to think I was crazy".

Sharing with family members often elicits a similar response. Anna declared,

"All my family believe I am nuts because I told them I hear music every waking moment".

Because of this fear factor, many people describe their auditory hallucinations in terms such as "musical tinnitus" to avoid using the word "hallucinations". You see, we don't typically think people with tinnitus as hallucinating or being nuts, do we?

Obviously, there is a real need for a new term to describe non-psychiatric auditory hallucinations—a name that has no negative connotations associated with it whatsoever, and one that does not include either the words "psychiatric" or "hallucinations".

Since the vast majority of people who experience auditory hallucinations hear some sort of phantom music or singing, I named this condition Musical Ear Syndrome. Not only does it not have any negative connotations, it almost sounds like it might be something good to have—like having an ear for music or having perfect pitch.

For example, when I say, "I've got Musical Ear Syndrome," the first thing that comes to your mind is not that I'm crazy. You see, there is no stigma attached to the term to

start with. You are left feeling neutral, or even slightly positive, towards this term, or you query with an open mind, “Musical Ear Syndrome—what’s that?”

Since I coined the term Musical Ear Syndrome or MES for short back in 2004, I have found that people are far more willing to openly talk about the phantom sounds they “hear”. In fact, the last time I did a search on Google for the phrase “Musical Ear Syndrome” (in quotes) I came up with more than 11,700 websites that now use this term!

Musical Ear Syndrome is Not New

Musical Ear Syndrome has been around for a long time. Only the name is new—not the phantom experiences themselves. For example, composer Robert Schumann heard auditory hallucinations towards the end of his life. At night, he heard musical notes and believed that he heard an angelic choir singing to him. He also heard the music of Beethoven and Schubert. He jotted down the music in February, 1854 and called it the Theme (WoO, 1854). He said he was taking dictation from Schubert’s ghost.

Definition of Musical Ear Syndrome

I define Musical Ear Syndrome as hearing non-tinnitus phantom sounds (that is, auditory hallucinations) of a non-psychiatric nature, often musical, but also including voices and other strange sounds.

Tinnitus vs. Musical Ear Syndrome Sounds

Once we throw out psychiatric auditory hallucinations, we are still left with two basic kinds of phantom sounds—tinnitus and Musical Ear Syndrome sounds. Here’s how to tell them apart.

Tinnitus sounds are single, simple (unmodulated) sounds such as ringing, buzzing, hissing, roaring, clicking, humming, rushing, whooshing droning and kindred sounds. In contrast, Musical Ear Syndrome sounds include multiple, complex (modulated) sounds such as singing, music and voices.

The Most Common Musical Ear Syndrome Sounds

Did you ever wonder what are the most common kinds of MES songs people hear? The truth is that hymns, Christmas carols and patriotic music comprise just over half of all the MES sounds people hear (52% combined).

One lady related, “My 66 year old mom lost almost all her hearing two months ago. The last three days [this was written on December 28th] she keeps hearing Silent Night and Oh, Come All Ye Faithful over and over again. It gets so loud that she can’t sleep. She has tried to make it go away but can’t. She says that it is just beautiful singing with a full orchestra to boot, but would really like some sleep”.

As a matter of interest, quite often MES sounds have a seasonal quality—thus people “hear” Christmas carols during the winter season and The Star Spangled Banner around the 4th of July. Incidentally, while Americans often hear The Star Spangled Banner, Canadians typically hear God Save the Queen or Oh Canada, and Australians often hear Waltzing Matilda!

How Common Is Musical Ear Syndrome?

Because so few people admit to hearing phantom sounds, researchers, up to now, have considered Musical Ear Syndrome (under whatever name they call it) very rare. But that is just not true. Musical Ear Syndrome is much more common than anyone seems to realize, and affects significant numbers of hard of hearing people.

Since few people are willing to admit to hearing these phantom sounds, it is difficult to obtain accurate figures. I estimate that well in excess of 10% of hard of hearing people experience these phantom sounds at one time or another.

For example, when I speak to groups of hard of hearing people on this subject, I often ask how many of them have heard such phantom sounds. Since they feel “safe” with me, invariably 10% to 30% of the people present are brave enough to put up their hands. And that is just those willing to publicly admit they have heard such phantom sounds. Others won’t even admit that much.

To date, I have collected the stories from more than 1,500 people regarding their MES experiences. This alone tells you how common MES really is.

Some Characteristics of People with Musical Ear Syndrome

Not everyone hears phantom sounds. Following are some of the characteristics common to many of the people who do experience Musical Ear Syndrome.

1. Often the Person Is Older

About two-thirds of the people with MES are older than 50. About one-third are older than 70. Only about one-third of the people experiencing MES are younger than 50.

2. Generally the Person Has Some Degree of Hearing Loss

Since MES is apparently often caused by lack of auditory stimulation, it stands to reason that many people with MES have some degree of hearing loss. Surprisingly, about a third of the people with MES report normal hearing. Just over half of the people experiencing MES, report either mild or moderate hearing losses. Interestingly enough, people with more severe hearing losses don't appear to have MES more frequently than their numbers warrant.

3. More Commonly Reported in Women than in Men

For some reason, typically three times as many women as men report hearing MES sounds. This does not necessarily mean that more women than men experience Musical Ear Syndrome (although it is quite likely that they do). It may just mean that more women than men are willing to speak up and seek help.

4. Commonly the Person is Anxious/Worried, Stressed or Depressed

Notice how anxiety, worry and stress play an important role in the occurrence of Musical Ear Syndrome. It seems that often people going through anxious experiences and stressful situations such as the death of a spouse or some sickness or problems in their family experience MES much more commonly than people whose lives are moving along smoothly. The same is true for depression. One out of five people experiencing MES admits to being depressed when their MES started.

5. More Often than Not, the Person Also Has Tinnitus

Before their Musical Ear Syndrome appeared, most people had pre-existing tinnitus. This is particularly true of those that are hard of hearing. It is probably not true for those whose MES is caused by background sounds. Such people typically have normal, or near-normal, hearing.

6. Often the MES Sounds Seem to Come from a Certain Direction

When the phantom sounds you hear appear to have directionality—that is, they appear to come from a definite direction, thus acting like real sounds—it is most difficult to believe that those sounds are truly phantom. More than one third of the people experiencing MES report that their MES sounds have directionality.

7. Generally Become Aware Their Sounds Are Phantom

Fortunately, most people who experience MES, as time passes, typically figure out that these sounds are not real. For example, one elderly lady who “knew” she was hearing a radio station realized that radio stations don’t play the same song over and over and over again endlessly. So, if the music she is hearing repeats endlessly, she knows it’s all in her head.

A man who heard phantom sounds while in bed had a different way of determining whether what he was hearing was real or phantom. He simply put the pillow over his ears. If he could still hear the sound just as loud, he knew it was in his head. However, if the pillow cut out the sound, he knew it was real. That worked for him.

Unfortunately, about one in five or one in six of the people experiencing MES cannot tell that the sounds they are hearing are truly phantom. These people are typically well up in their 80s. Even when caregivers explain to them that these sounds are not real, they refuse to believe it, and often become angry at the person who’s trying to tell them otherwise. In my experience, it is almost impossible to help such people. The best I can do is to explain clearly to their children or caregivers what is happening so that they can understand what their parent is going through.

8. May Appear to Act Irrationally

The good news is that most people soon come to realize the MES sounds they are hearing are phantom and thus don’t respond to them as though they are real. However, numbers of people, especially those up in their 80s and 90s, don’t seem to be able to separate their phantom sounds from real sounds. As a result, they continue to act as though what they are hearing is real. This gives rise to some bizarre, and often what appears to be irrational behavior. Don’t let that throw you. Although people with MES may have what appears to be bizarre behavior, if you put yourself in their shoes, you’ll quickly realize that they are behaving sanely and rationally based on what their senses are telling them is true, even though the sounds they are “hearing” are indeed phantom.

Unfortunately, because of their apparently irrational behavior, too often, doctors and caregivers (which includes family members) have quickly written such people off as being “nuts” and treat them as such, when in reality, they are simply being fooled by their MES. Here are some examples.

An 82 year old hard of hearing widow began hearing noises on the second floor of her house. To her it sounded like a homeless person was living there. She heard

him come into the house, usually at night, walk up the stairs and move things around upstairs. She never saw him, or spoke to him.

A few times she even summoned the courage to climb the stairs and see what was going on. She never found anything out of place, and there was never any signs of the stranger.

To try to stop this, she changed the locks on her house, not just once, but twice. Also, on two occasions, she called the police. The police thoroughly searched the house and grounds without finding any evidence of an intruder.

You see, in this case she heard certain sounds and made a rational decision based on their being real. These sounds had moving directionality—walking up the stairs, moving around upstairs, etc. Thus she acted prudently (as far as she was concerned) in changing the locks and calling the police, but to outsiders, her actions seemed a bit nuts.

Here's another example. A concerned neighbor explained, "We have a neighbor in our condo who has been fairly deaf for many years. He is about 80 now. In recent years, he is hearing music, which he attributes to neighbors next door, who he feels are "against him" and play music all night. No one else in the condo has ever heard such music. It is quite quiet here at night. He has enlisted the help of paralegals and others, demanding that the "music" stop. Our condo board is beside itself, as his threats become more aggressive. He is making everyone's life miserable."

This man also hears "real" music and "knows" exactly where it is coming from—that neighbor next door. So he does the rational thing and tries to get the Condo board to stop it, and when they don't, he enlists the help of a paralegal. To everyone else, he is acting irrational, but, because this music is so real, has directionality, and the people won't stop being inconsiderate, he is taking legal action.

In these above stories you now can see that what appears at first glance to be irrational thinking and behavior is rooted in the firm belief that these phantom sounds are real. Unless, or until, a person realizes that their brains are playing tricks on them, they will continue on in their apparently bizarre behavior.

And while we are on this subject, you've all heard stories of people who supposedly hear radio stations through their dental fillings, haven't you? These stories have been around for a long time now. I remember my dad telling me such stories more than 50 years ago.

In spite of the many reports of radio broadcasts being received through dental fillings, I'm not aware of a single proven case. I now know that what people thought were

their fillings picking up radio stations is in reality Musical Ear Syndrome. Tooth fillings don't receive radio signals. People came up with this explanation in their desperate search for a rational explanation for the strange phantom radio-like sounds they were "hearing"—so they wouldn't have to admit they were crazy.

Three Reasons Why MES Sounds Make You Believe They Are Real

Here are three reasons why Musical Ear Syndrome can completely trick people into believing that the phantom sounds they hear are real.

1. The Sounds Can Seem Absolutely Real

As far as you are concerned, you are hearing them with your ears—so no way could they be phantom sounds. Therefore, you treat them as real sounds until, hopefully, you realize your brain is fooling you (yet again).

2. Often the Sounds Have Directionality

They are not just "in your head", but you "know" they are coming from a certain location—the house next door, the apartment below you (or above you), etc. Therefore, you have no reason to believe they are not real sounds.

3. These Sounds Are Sometimes Accompanied by Tactile Sensations

Some people actually feel the appropriate tactile sensation that would accompany the real sound. For example, you might also "feel" the floor vibrating from all the racket downstairs. Here are a couple of stories of a person not only hearing sounds, but also feeling them too.

Carolyn explained, "Late at night when I don't have my hearing aids on, I am absolutely sure that there are trucks and bulldozers working just outside my bedroom window late at night when it is quiet. We are the only ones living on our little country lane. There's no traffic of any kind outside my bedroom windows. I feel the vibrations too. I thought I was going off the deep end."

Since our minds associate certain sensations with certain sounds, it automatically adds them in—thus heightening the illusion that there is something real going on when nothing is happening. In Carolyn's case, you can't have a bulldozer working right outside your house without it rumbling and shaking the ground as it works—so she both "hears" it and "feels" the house shaking.

Sometimes our minds make up totally illogical explanations to try to fit what we hear and feel into our reality.

Angela related, “My 90 year old father-in-law has been hard of hearing for some time, and it is getting progressively worse. The geriatric psychiatrist tested him and found no dementia. He mainly hears loud music when alone in his apartment, oftentimes in the middle of the night. He thinks the landlady knows exactly when he lays down to sleep, and that is when she turns the music all the way up.

Unfortunately, he has taken to knocking on the downstairs landlady’s door (at 3 A.M.) telling her to turn the music down. We have been with him a few times when he heard the music—none of us heard anything. Now get this, he also believes she has a vibrating device or machine that makes his floor vibrate.”

Feeling the floor vibrate when you hear phantom sounds coming from below you is not as strange as you might think. Several people have told me they experience vibrations along with their MES. When two of your five senses begin telling you the same thing, it’s very difficult to believe these sensations are all phantom.

Six Common Triggers of Musical Ear Syndrome

Exactly what causes MES is still a mystery, but there are a number of things that seem to trigger MES.

1. Anxiety/Stress/Worry

People that are anxious or stressed are much more likely to experience MES than those who are calm and laid-back.

2. Depression

As is the case with tinnitus, Musical Ear Syndrome is more common in people with depression. Treating their depression can cause the phantom sounds to fade away on their own.

3. Constant Background Noise

Sometimes, constant background noise blends in and begins to take on a musical quality. This can happen whether you have a hearing loss or not. I think this is one of the common triggers of MES in people with normal hearing.

Bethany explained, “My mom is hard of hearing. Recently on a trip to Arizona with my dad she commented to dad when they arrived at their hotel that she really enjoyed the music on the plane. Dad said there was no music on the plane. On the return trip, mom started hearing the music again and told dad to listen. He said, nope, no music. But mom continued to enjoy it until the plane landed.”

I’ve determined that one common theme with hearing people is that many times their MES sounds are triggered by a fan in the house. For example, a man with normal hearing explained, “I hear music only when a noise is going on in my environment. For example, if I’m hearing the air conditioner outside the window or the furnace fan, I hear an orchestra, or sometimes just a song. When the triggering noise turns off, the music stops.”

A hearing woman explained, “I only hear MES sounds when the furnace fan is running and I am in bed and the house is quiet. They go when the furnace or air conditioning fan quits running”.

4. Brain Abnormalities

Auditory hallucinations can result from seizures such as temporal lobe epilepsy. Musical hallucinations may be triggered by unruptured intracranial aneurysms, or may be associated with dorsal pontine lesions. They may also be triggered by pockets of infection in your brain such as is caused by Lyme disease.

5. Drugs

Most people know that some “recreational” drugs such as Alcohol, Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), Marijuana (Pot), Methamphetamines (Meth) and other recreational drugs can cause auditory hallucinations, but it never crosses the minds of most people that some of the prescription drugs they are taking can also cause such phantom sounds. Furthermore, elderly people tend to take more and more medications as they age. Unfortunately, numerous drugs can cause auditory hallucinations.

Gail explained, “My father has a profound hearing loss that may be getting worse. He was recently placed on Terazosin. Since starting the medication he hears “music” even when his hearing aids are out.”

Note: Terazosin (and more than 360 other drugs and substances that can cause hallucinations) are listed in Appendix 2 in the back of our book *Phantom Voices, Ethereal Music & Other Spooky Sounds*.

6. Hearing Loss

Hearing loss is a very commonly associated with Musical Ear Syndrome. This is because with increasing hearing loss, the brain no longer hears what it used to hear, and it sometimes decides to make up for this lack with music of its own. Doctors call this sensory deprivation.

Seven Steps to Work Through When Helping People with Musical Ear Syndrome

Now comes the important part—what can you do about your Musical Ear Syndrome? Very briefly, here are a number of things you can do to help yourself manage your auditory hallucinations so they have less of an impact on your life.

1. Seek Competent Medical Attention to Rule Out Brain Disorders & Other Medical Conditions

There is a very small chance that you may have a brain tumor or other brain abnormality that is causing your Musical Ear Syndrome. It is good to be checked out by a neurologist to be sure there are no physical brain problems. You may decide to have MRIs, CT scans or EEGs. Knowing there is nothing physically wrong “upstairs” will give you a large sense of relief.

2. Learn About Musical Ear Syndrome

Learning all you can about what you are dealing with takes much of the anxiety away. Thus, you are better able to cope with your MES. Furthermore, once you know what MES is, you often will feel an enormous sense of relief. With that sense of relief, often a surprising thing happens. Your Musical Ear Syndrome goes away on its own, or tends to fade more into the background. Many times this is all it takes.

3. Convince Your Brain of the Falseness of Your Musical Ear Syndrome Sounds.

When you know your brain is playing tricks on you, do whatever it takes to convince your brain—and you can put an end to some of these phantom sounds.

Remember the man that heard music at night—he put the pillow over his ears. If the sound volume dropped, he knew it was real music. If it stayed at the same volume, he knew it was all in his head.

4. Reduce Your Anxiety Level

Very often, just learning about Musical Ear Syndrome is enough to reduce your anxiety over the strange sounds you are hearing. That is why it is so important to have good information available like this article. If you are anxious about other things, get your anxiety under control and your MES may also fade away. The same is true for depression.

5. Rule Out Drugs

If your MES began soon after you began taking a new drug or after you changed the dose on an existing drug, that may be the cause. Changing to a different drug or reducing the dose to its original level may let your MES fade away.

6. Enrich Your Environment with Real Sounds

Musical Ear Syndrome thrives when your brain doesn't get adequate auditory stimulation. This often happens if you have a hearing loss and consequently don't hear the common everyday environmental sounds that keep your auditory neurons happy.

Since hearing loss and aging often go hand in hand, this is why MES is so common among elderly, hard of hearing people. In addition, often elderly people live in quiet environments, and may live alone after the death of a spouse, thus exacerbating the lack of auditory stimulation.

Therefore, if you have Musical Ear Syndrome, surround yourself with real sounds. Give your brain real sounds to listen to all the time. If you are hard of hearing, wear your hearing aids so you can hear something—then your brain can focus on those real sounds and quit producing its own phantom sounds.

7. Become Socially Active

Because of their hearing losses, hard of hearing people tend to withdraw from social situations and thus do not have much social interaction. This just further compounds their world of silence.

Becoming socially active does a number of things. First, it goes a long ways towards keeping your mind from focusing on your phantom music. Second, your brain now has scintillating conversations to focus on. Third, increased socialization helps lift the depression and sense of isolation you may be feeling that so often makes your Musical Ear Syndrome worse.

There you have it. This has been a brief overview of Musical Ear Syndrome, several causes and a number of ways to help overcome it. However, if you are hard of hearing and have Musical Ear Syndrome, look on the bright side. Hearing phantom music isn't always all bad. As Sheila says, "I shall miss it if it ever fades away." I mean, where else can you hear beautiful music without wearing hearing aids, assistive devices, iPods, headphones or other paraphernalia?

To learn more about Musical Ear Syndrome and the things you can do to help bring it under your control, see the second edition of our book *Phantom Voices, Ethereal Music & Other Spooky Sounds*. (See ordering information at the back.)

The original of this article is on the Center's website at <http://hearinglosshelp.com/blog/musical-ear-syndrome-the-phantom-voices-ethereal-music-other-spooky-sounds-many-hard-of-hearing-people-secretly-experience/>.

Good Books on Hearing Loss

Books in the series:

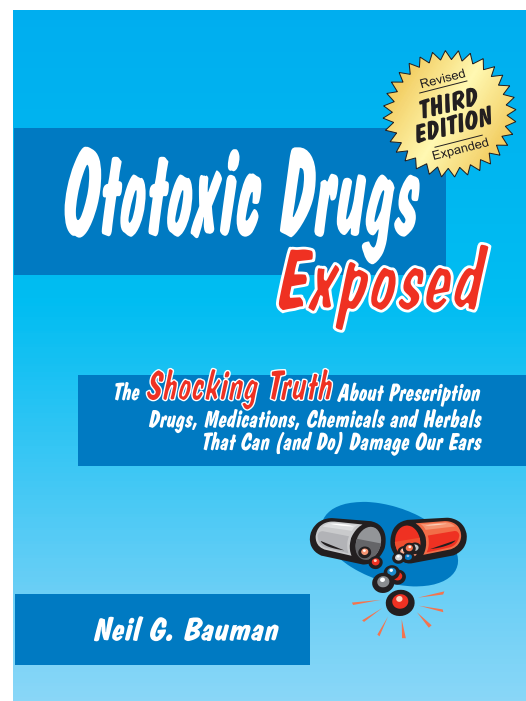
Everything You Wanted to Know About Your Hearing Loss But Were Afraid to Ask (Because You Knew You Wouldn't Hear the Answers Anyway!)

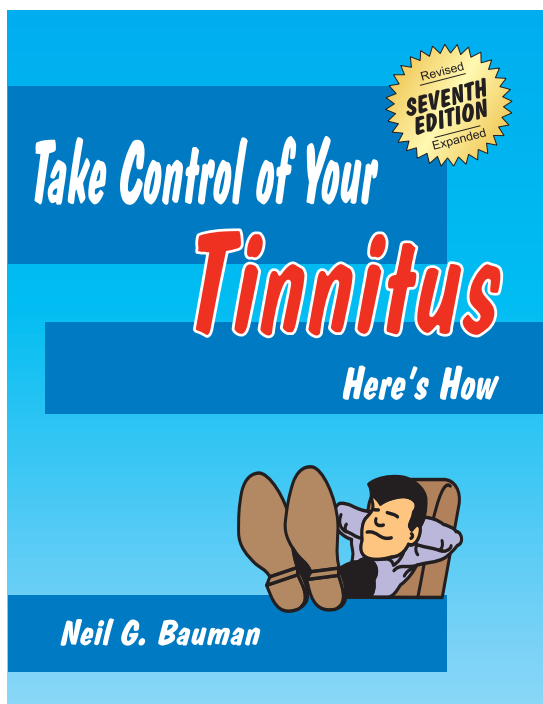
by Neil G. Bauman, Ph.D.

If you have enjoyed these articles and would like to learn more tinnitus or Musical Ear Syndrome, or about hearing loss and how you can successfully live with it, you may be interested in some helpful books by Dr. Neil. Each book is packed with the things you need to know in order to thrive in spite of your various hearing loss issues. To order any of these books, open your browser and go to <http://www.hearinglosshelp.com/shop/category/books>.

Ototoxic Drugs Exposed—The Shocking Truth About Prescription Drugs, Medications, Chemicals and Herbals That Can (and Do) Damage Our Ears (\$52.45; eBook \$39.95)

This book, now in its third edition, reveals the shocking truth that many prescription drugs can damage your ears. Some drugs slowly and insidiously rob you of your hearing, cause your ears to ring or destroy your balance. Other drugs can smash your ears in one fell swoop, leaving you with profound, permanent hearing loss and bringing traumatic change into your life. Learn how to protect your ears from the ravages of ototoxic drugs and chemicals. Describes the specific ototoxic effects of 877 drugs, 35 herbals and 148 chemicals (798 pages).



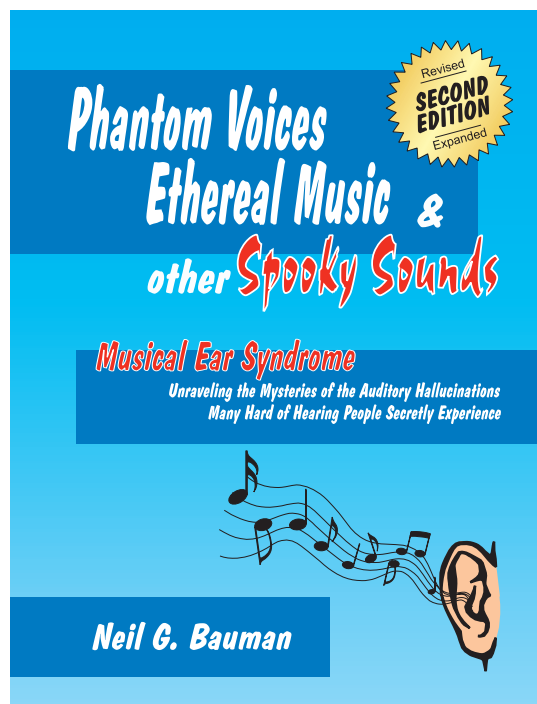


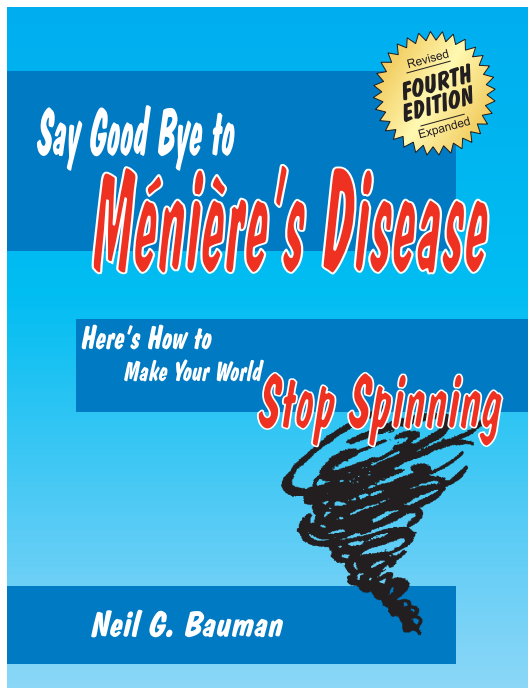
Take Control of Your Tinnitus—Here's How
(\$29.95; eBook \$22.99)

If your ears ring, buzz, chirp, hiss, click or roar, you know just how annoying tinnitus can be. The good news is that you do not have to put up with this racket for the rest of your life. You can take control of your tinnitus. Recent studies show that a lot of what we thought we knew about tinnitus is not true at all. Exciting new research reveals a number of things that you can do to eliminate or greatly reduce the severity of your tinnitus so that it no longer bothers you. This totally-revised, up-to-date and expanded 7th edition contains the very latest in tinnitus research and treatment. In this book you will learn what tinnitus is, what causes tinnitus and things you can do to take control of your tinnitus (356 pages).

Phantom Voices, Ethereal Music & Other Spooky Sounds (\$22.49; eBook \$16.99)

When you realize you are hearing phantom sounds, you immediately think that something has gone dreadfully wrong “upstairs”—that you are going crazy. Because of this, few people openly talk about the strange phantom voices, music, singing and other spooky sounds they hear. This book, the first of its kind in the world, lifts the veil on “Musical Ear syndrome” and reveals numerous first-hand accounts of the many strange phantom sounds people experience. Not only that, it explains what causes these phantom sounds, and more importantly, what you can do to eliminate them, or at least, bring them under control (178 pages).



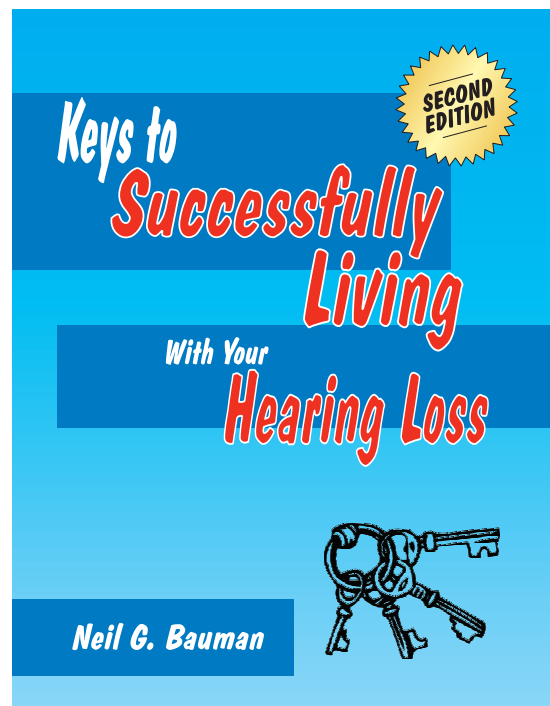


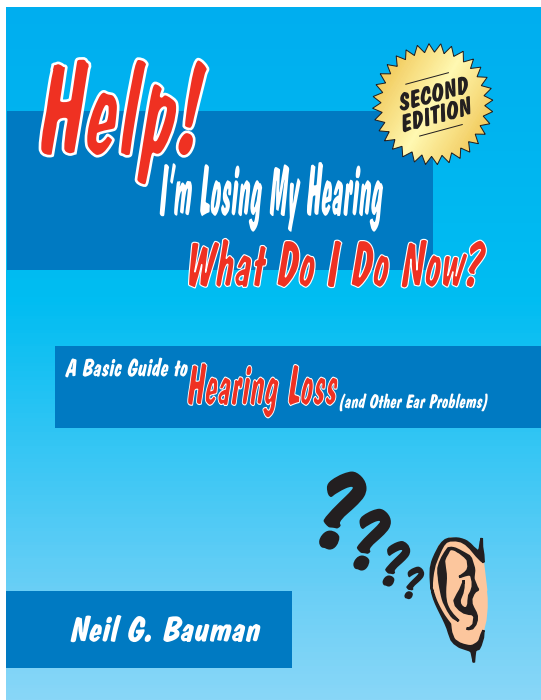
Say Good Bye to Ménière's Disease—Here's How to Make Your World Stop Spinning
(\$21.95; eBook \$16.49)

Ménière's disease is one of the more baffling and incapacitating conditions a person can experience. If you suffer from your world spinning, have a fluctuating hearing loss, tinnitus and a feeling of fullness in your ears, this book is for you. It details what Ménière's disease is like; explains the recent breakthrough into the underlying cause of Ménière's; and shows you how, at last, you can be free from the ravages of this debilitating condition. Each page is packed with practical information to help you successfully conquer your Meniere's disease. Join the hundreds and hundreds of people whose worlds have now stopped spinning (128 pages).

Keys to Successfully Living with Your Hearing Loss (\$19.97; eBook \$15.49)

Do you know: a) the critical missing element to successfully living with your hearing loss? b) that the No. 1 coping strategy hard of hearing people instinctively use is wrong, wrong, wrong? c) what the single most effective hearing loss coping strategy is? d) how you can turn your hearing aids into awesome hearing devices? This book addresses the surprising answers to these and other critical questions. Applying them to your life will put you well on the road to successfully living with your hearing loss. (84 pages).



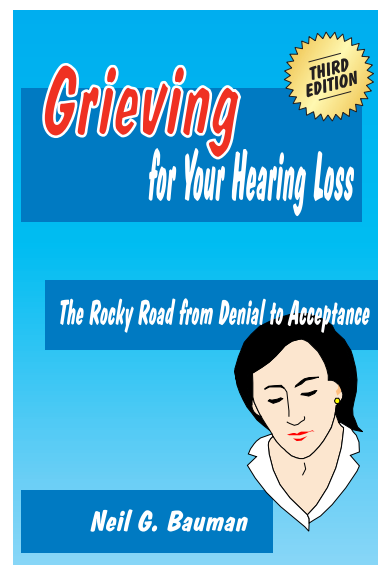


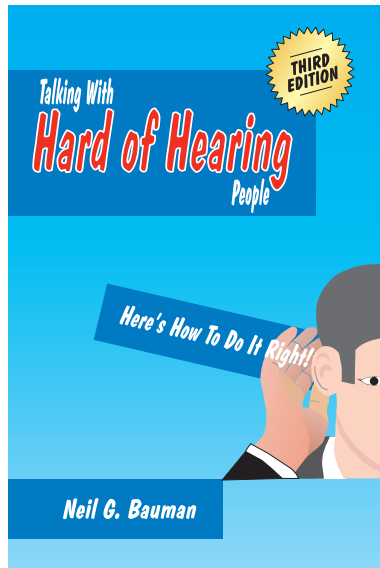
Help! I'm Losing My Hearing—What Do I Do Now? (\$18.95; eBook \$14.49)

Losing your hearing can flip your world upside down and leave your mind in a turmoil. You may be full of fears, wondering how you will be able to live the rest of your life as a hard of hearing person. You don't know where to turn. You lament, "What do I do now?" Set your mind at rest. This easy to read book, written by a fellow hard of hearing person, is packed with the information and resources you need to successfully deal with your hearing loss and other ear conditions. (116 pages).

Grieving for Your Hearing Loss—The Rocky Road from Denial to Acceptance (\$12.95; eBook \$9.95)

When you lose your hearing you need to grieve. This is not optional—but critical to your continued mental and physical health. This book leads you through the process of dealing with the grief and pain you experience as a result of your hearing loss. It explains what you are going through each step of the way. It gives you hope when you are in the depths of despair and depression. It shows you how you can lead a happy vibrant life again in spite of your hearing loss. This book has helped many (56 pages).



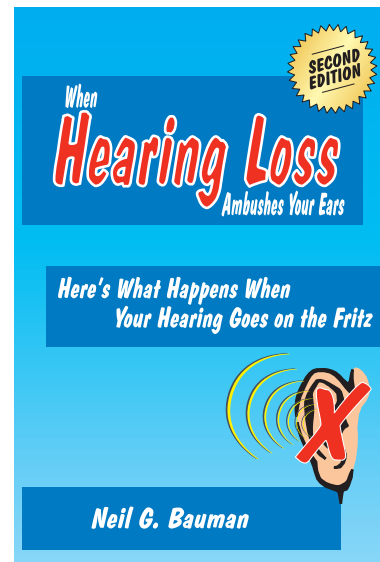


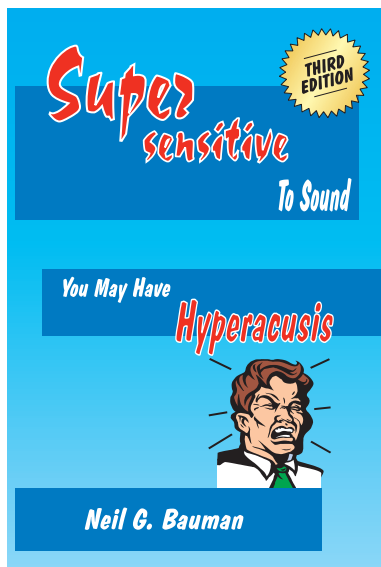
Talking with Hard of Hearing People—Here's How to Do It Right! (\$9.95; eBook \$7.95)

Talking is important to all of us. When communication breaks down, we all suffer. For hard of hearing people this happens all the time. This book is for you—whether you are hearing or hard of hearing! It explains how to communicate with hard of hearing people in one-to-one situations, in groups and meetings, in emergency situations, and in hospitals and nursing homes. When you use the principles given in this book, good things will happen and you will finally be able to have a comfortable chat with a hard of hearing person (38 pages).

When Hearing Loss Ambushes Your Ears—Here's What Happens When Your Hearing Goes on the Fritz (\$14.95; eBook \$11.95)

Hearing loss often blind-sides you. As a result, your first step should be to learn as much as you can about your hearing loss; then you will be able to cope better. This most interesting book explains how your ears work, the causes of hearing loss, what you can expect to hear with different levels of hearing loss and why you often can't understand what you hear. Lots of audiograms and charts help make things clear. You will also discover a lot of fascinating things about how loud noises damage your ears (88 pages).



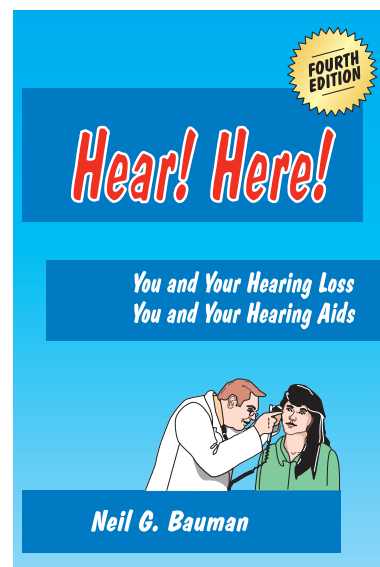


Supersensitive to Sound? You May Have Hyperacusis (\$9.95; eBook \$7.95)

If some (or all) normal sounds seem so loud they blow your socks off, this is the book you want to read! You don't have to avoid noise or lock yourself away in a soundproof room. Exciting new research on this previously baffling problem reveals what you can do to help bring your hyperacusis under control (42 pages).

Here! Here! You and Your Hearing Loss/You and Your Hearing Aids (\$12.95; eBook \$10.95)

Part I of this book contains a series of my newspaper articles on hearing loss such as, "Hear Today. Gone Tomorrow?" "Hearing Loss Is Sneaky!" "The Wages of Din Is Deaf!" "When Your Ears Ring..." "Get In My Face Before You Speak!" "How's That Again?" "Being Hard of Hearing Is Hard" "I'm Deaf, Not Daft!" Part II contains articles on hearing aids such as, "You Better Watch Out..." "Before Buying Your First Hearing Aid..." "Please Don't Lock Me Away in Your Drawer" "Good-bye World of Silence!" "Becoming Friends with Your Hearing Aids" "Two's Better Than One!" (56 pages).



You can order any of the foregoing books/eBooks (plus you can read more than 800 other helpful articles about hearing loss and related issues) from the

Center for Hearing Loss Help

web site at

<http://www.hearinglosshelp.com>
or order them from the address below

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Stewartstown, PA 17363-8322
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Web site: <http://www.hearinglosshelp.com>

