

How Mindfulness Helped Me Create Peace With My Tinnitus

Mindfulness

By Lisa Caldwell, MA

In 2005, I lost my hearing on one side and gained tinnitus in its place. Initially, I was quite fascinated by its varied repertoire of pings, squelches, whirs, and clicks. I have a very clear memory of walking home from the train station in those early days captivated by the constantly changing noise in my head. That was before my ENT told me that my

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tinnitus was going to be a permanent fixture, not just something temporary to keep me entertained.

That news changed my relationship with tinnitus completely. Once I knew that I could potentially have these noises for the rest of my life, my tinnitus became invasive, annoying, distracting, frustrating, and the source of both anxiety and depression. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't concentrate at work, I was addicted to Google — convinced the tinnitus was a sign of a tumor or illness the doctors hadn't picked up. I became acutely aware of every change in my tinnitus pitch and volume. No longer amusing, it was irritating and, frankly, scary. It felt like my tinnitus had a life of its own and was utterly beyond my control.

That didn't stop me trying to control it, of course! I became an expert patient in tinnitus. At every whiff of a success story, I was all over social media to find out more. The tinnitus was tiring enough in itself, and my obsessive pursuit of the all-elusive cure just made me feel worse.

My friends and family couldn't understand how tinnitus could make me feel the way it did. It's not that they didn't try, but I'm not sure anyone can really “get” tinnitus until they have it. So, I became increasingly isolated. I sent my husband to parties alone, claimed I was too busy to join girlfriends for dinner in the latest restaurants, and avoided the booming cinema like the plague.

I lived like this for nine exhausting years. By then, I'd also acquired slipped disks in my neck and back and was living with chronic pain. I was desperate for anything to make my life better. Fate stepped in. Redundancy from a job I adored coincided with a space at an eight-week mindfulness course in the nearest city. I signed up and changed my life.

Mindfulness is a series of practices that train us to pay inquiring attention to our thoughts and sensations, without judging what we experience as good or bad. We learn to distinguish between what actually exists in the here and now and

what is created by our thoughts or emotions. That awareness then gives us a choice in how to respond.

After the eight-week course, and with continued practice, I found that I was learning to manage my life with chronic pain better. The pain was still there, but I was less aware of it, less worried by it, and I spent less time harking back to the good old days before it became a permanent fixture in my life. I'm embarrassed by how long it took me to realize that I could adapt the techniques I had learned to managing my tinnitus! But I did. And it opened the gateway to a life where I live with tinnitus, but it doesn't control me. And there are many moments I forget it's there.

I knew I couldn't keep this to myself when so many people are suffering with tinnitus. So, I went on to qualify as a mindfulness meditation teacher. And my job — my life's vocation — is teaching mindfulness to fellow tinnitus travelers, so they can live with tinnitus rather than suffer with it.

Living on Automatic

One of the key things that I have learned from mindfulness practice is to be aware of the automatic thoughts, feelings, and behavior that kick in when certain events happen. These can be both helpful and unhelpful.

If you're driving a car, automatic processes can be really useful. You likely will not be aware of the process of shifting gears, the movement of your feet, and the way you hold the steering wheel. Can you imagine having to think carefully about driving like you did when you were learning? It would be exhausting!

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But not all automatic processes are helpful. Let's imagine that our tinnitus changes sound or gets louder. Whether we've had months or years of tinnitus, it won't take us long to develop automatic thoughts about these changes, such as the following:

“Something must be really wrong with me.”

“Is this going to last forever?”

“I can't cope with this!”

“I can't concentrate — I'm going to lose my job.”

And with these thoughts come the clenched teeth, panicky breathing, knotted stomach, hunched shoulders, and headache. Why? Because our thoughts affect how we feel, and how we feel feeds back into our thoughts.

Even if we notice this cycle, we often employ strategies like suppression (“mustn't grumble”) or putting things in perspective (“it could be worse — at least it's not...”). These not only fail to get us out of the cycle but also actually pull us back into it. The more we attempt to avoid or get

rid of the thoughts and feelings, the more they persist.

So how do we start to release those automatic thoughts and behaviors that aren't helpful? By paying attention.

Paying Attention

Mindfulness encourages us to pay attention to the feelings, thoughts, and sensations that we're experiencing right now. We become aware, for example, if we are worrying about our future life with tinnitus or ruminating about what we might have done to have caused this challenging condition.

This awareness allows us to press pause for a moment ... then gently refocus our attention on our experience right now and whatever we are doing in this present moment.

The result is that we disrupt the cycle — the ping-pong between thoughts and emotions — and step off the tinnitus roller coaster. And, believe me, that is really liberating!



Let's take an example. Whenever I wake up at night, the first thing I become aware of is my tinnitus. Before learning mindfulness, my head would fill with these automatic thoughts:

"Urgh, there it is. I bet that's what woke me up. I can't escape it. Why did I have to get tinnitus? It's not fair. I can't live like this. I can't go the rest of my life getting so little sleep. I can't function without my seven hours. I might as well get up — I'm never going to get back to sleep."

As I became increasingly wound up, my heart rate would raise, my breathing would become shallow, and my body would become tense. No wonder I couldn't get back to sleep, and my husband would find me doing laundry at four in the morning!

I still wake up at night, but now, thanks to regular mindfulness practice, my automatic thoughts run pretty differently:

"Oh, hello again, tinnitus! What shall I do to get back to sleep this

time? Some mindful breathing? A body scan? Play some masking sounds? Okay, let's pop the masking sounds on and start a breathing anchor meditation."

No drama, no catastrophizing. No tossing and turning for hours gnashing my teeth about the unfairness of it all. Instead, I acknowledge my tinnitus and accept it is there. I then decide what mindfulness tool I am going to use to get back to sleep.

It doesn't work all the time. As I write this, I have a full-on head cold, and my tinnitus is having a party. Last night, even mindfulness and masking weren't enough to help me get straight back to sleep. So, I got up and puttered for a little while, playing masking sounds through my hearing aids.

Whereas before I'd be stressed about the sleep I was missing and how exhausted I'd feel the next day, now my automatic thoughts have changed to the extent that I can

accept that the situation is what it is — a temporary increase in my tinnitus, thanks to my cold. And the head and heart understanding that no matter how challenging my tinnitus may seem, I actually *can* manage it, if I take it moment by moment. 🌈



Lisa Caldwell studied law at Cambridge University and was a solicitor in London and Manchester before losing her hearing on one side overnight. She is a certified Mindfulness Meditation teacher. Since 2015, she has

walked alongside people who have hearing loss or tinnitus and has used her unique combination of expertise and personal experience to help them live their best lives, regardless of these challenges. Like everyone with tinnitus, she wishes there were a cure. But until that day arrives, her mission is to change our relationship with tinnitus so it becomes just one part of a great life, rather than the sole focus of a hard one. You can read more at www.thehearingcoach.com and contact Lisa at lisa@thehearingcoach.com

