



DO YOU HEAR THAT RINGING IN MY EARS?

BY CONNIE HEIN

There has been much speculation over the centuries that the famous painter, Vincent Van Gogh, suffered from severe tinnitus. Shortly before his death, Van Gogh cut off his ear and painted a self-portrait with the side of his head bandaged. Though his idea of treatment may be extreme, Van Gogh's suffering may mirror that of many who live with the painful condition today.

Tinnitus is the perception of sound without an external cause, often described as ringing or whooshing in the ears, that affects as many as 50 million Americans. Within this number, 10 to 15 million sufferers seek medical treatment for severe, highly disturbing tinnitus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that a million new cases of tinnitus are identified each year, 200,000 of which are considered severe. Tinnitus symptoms can negatively impact normal daily activities and

can lead to additional medical conditions, such as anxiety, depression and sleep deprivation.

Many of the millions of Americans suffering with the condition believe there is nothing they can do for relief, because over the years it has been misunderstood, as it was in an earlier century by people like Van Gogh.

The good news is there exists a growing awareness of treating the condition, along with other sound sensitivity issues, which is much easier and more effective than cutting off an ear. It's as simple as finding an audiologist like Natalie Phillips, AuD., who will be persistent in finding the treatment that works best for each and every patient.

S.A. Armijo is one of those patients. The tinnitus and hyperacusis (sensitivity to moderate level sounds) treatment she received last year from Dr. Phillips at Advanced Otolaryngology, in Fort Collins, was a miracle. "To be able to enjoy both music and absolute silence and also the soothing sounds of nature for the first time since I was

very young is a miracle that has made every day of my life happier."

She remembers being able to sit and enjoy listening to her father play the violin as a little girl, then gradually the sound of even soft music became painful. She was not able to enjoy any kind of music or embrace the comfort of sitting in silence. There was never silence because of the ringing in her ears. There was no sanctuary for Armijo. After visiting several doctors and being told there was nothing they could do except sever the nerve in her ear and leave her completely deaf, she had almost given up hope of finding relief from the condition.

Armijo's final attempt at relief was a visit to Advanced Otolaryngology for a second opinion. She told her story to Dr. Phillips, who had recently joined the clinic.

Dr. Phillips, who says tinnitus is her passion, has studied, researched and treated the condition for many years, and offers what she believes is the most effective treatment for the condition. She says the FDA-approved Neurotonics Tinnitus Treatment (NTT) has a 96 percent success rate in treating the condition.

This treatment is proven to interact, interrupt and desensitize tinnitus by delivering a customized neural stimulus embedded in clinically modified music, all within a portable device to be used by the patient a few hours a day.

"Through many years of research it was found

that disturbing tinnitus may be due to the fact that it lingers in certain areas of the brain," Dr. Phillips says. "For people with mild cases of tinnitus, it does not negatively impact their lives because their brain detects it, realizes it is nothing it needs to pay attention to and then moves on."

Patients who need treatment are those whose brain detects the noise in the subcortical level of the brain, then for some reason the noise goes beyond this level to the cortical level of the brain (affecting perception and evaluation), sometimes engaging the limbic system (which generates emotional association) and the autonomic nervous system (responsible for physiological responses). NTT best addresses the neurological processes of tinnitus, specifically its auditory, attentional and emotional aspects.

"By targeting underlying neurological processes, the treatment is proven to offer long-lasting relief," Dr. Phillips says. "The goal of tinnitus therapy is to reduce the awareness and disturbance of tinnitus by working on the brain's perception of tinnitus. It is not a 'cure' as the goal is to reduce the occurrence at the cortical level of the brain along with the limbic system and autonomic nervous system from engaging, thereby reducing the tinnitus back to a 'normal' level where the subcortical level of the brain may detect it from time to time, but can filter it out and the patient does not experience the same reaction to tinnitus as when it was disturbing."

Dr. Phillips has been providing tinnitus treatment to patients for over 10 years. "It can be an awful, debilitating condition with devastating impact on a patient's quality of life." She says that is why she is so pleased to be able to offer NTT, which represents a significant step forward for a condition

with traditionally limited treatment options.

NTT is delivered through a compact, lightweight and uniquely designed medical device customized to the patient's hearing, tinnitus and loudness discomfort level profile. When placed in the ear, it delivers a customized neural stimulus that promotes neural plastic changes, allowing the brain to filter out the tinnitus sounds.

This stimulus is clinically administered and monitored within spectrally modified, customized music, which engages the brain's emotional response center (the limbic system) and thereby reduces tinnitus-related disturbance. The device also logs usage data for interpretation and assistance to modify therapy for the individual patient.

Dr. Phillips says treatment typically occurs over a six to eight-month period, with daily use recommended for two to four hours per day, especially when the tinnitus is most disturbing. The treatment can take place during regular activities such as reading, relaxing or computer work.

The treatment involves a multi-stage process. In stage one, a continuous broadband frequency stimulus is embedded within spectrally modified music which provides a high degree of interaction and relief from the tinnitus. In stage two, intermittent interaction with tinnitus perception helps decrease the brain's sensitivity to the tinnitus sound.

Advanced Otolaryngology is the only clinic in Northern Colorado to offer the therapy alongside other successful tinnitus and sound sensitivity treatments, including Tinnitus Retraining Therapy (TRT). TRT incorporates protocols to treat tinnitus, hyperacusis, misophonia (dislike of a particular sound which may cause a physiological response), phonophobia, and selective sound sensitivity syndrome.

Treating tinnitus with TRT is using sound therapy through small ear-level devices to remove the perception of tinnitus from a patient's consciousness through habituation. The success rate of TRT is over 80 percent in reducing the awareness and disturbance of tinnitus.

Dr. Phillips says they provide a complimentary and comprehensive consultation as part of the initial diagnosis process to determine if there are other conditions that need to be treated along with or before the tinnitus.

Armijo says for her the treatment was truly a gift. "The joy of being able to enjoy music again and meditate in pure silence can't be measured." She encourages others who have been suffering in silence (or non-silence) that there is hope and that Dr. Phillips was devoted to making the treatment experience as pleasant as possible. "Her compassion for her patients showed in her dedication to her work and knowledge in this area. I hope to get the word out so she can help thousands of people like me."

As for Van Gogh, through all the controversy that surrounded his mental illness and death, the accumulation of facts indicates there is a common denominator between his symptoms and the symptoms of typical tinnitus sufferers today. His decision to cut off his ear may likely have been an extreme attempt to treat his debilitating condition. For the millions suffering with the condition today, there is a much more sensible solution. ✚

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