



Tinnitus Case Studies



Shelley to release her 'Tinnitus Awareness' App in February 2014

Shelley aged 37 lives in Kent and in October 2011, she became aware of a loud high-pitched ringing in her right ear. She started to feel panic almost immediately. She was referred by her GP to ENT but was offered no additional support or guidance and had to wait several months for an appointment, pinning her hopes on ENT providing a fixable solution to this dreadful condition. During the first specialist appointment, her ears were briefly inspected and were apparently perfectly normal. She was referred for a hearing test – another 3 months on a waiting list. The results came back normal and she was referred for an MRI. Following the scan, the results were not sent out for several months - in the end she had to chase them. The results showed no abnormalities and she was invited to attend a sound therapy session. By now, 6 months had passed and Shelley was relieved to be provided with coping strategies in the form of sound therapy – she wished this had been offered from the moment her tinnitus had started! It took nearly two years for Shelley to come to terms with the tinnitus and manage it better. Now Shelley is managing her tinnitus she has decided to do something to help others, she told the BTA:

“Having taken my young son to a 3-years olds’ disco party where the music was so loud some children were crying and running away from the source of the sound, passion was sparked in me to do something to prevent others from suffering like I and so many others have. I secured a research grant from the university to investigate the level of noise in recreational venues attended by children to ascertain whether they posed a potential risk to hearing. The results were shocking and I concluded that something needed to be done to safe guard the future of our children’s hearing. I am now in the process of building a mobile application aimed at parents with young children to arm them with the facts and provide a playful sound meter device that engages both the parent and child in understanding where sound levels may be too loud. I genuinely believe that an early education is the best method in reducing the risk of noise induced hearing damage and hope my app goes someway in support of this goal”.

PRESS ENQUIRIES

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'Little Sounds of Pain' - Singer/Songwriter's experience of tinnitus

Isobel aged 29 lives in East Sussex. In April 2011, when Isobel was 26, she woke up one morning and her left ear was blocked. Unknowingly she did the wrong thing and stuck her finger in her ear. This lodged a large plug of earwax right up against her eardrum. She could hardly hear out of this ear and soon after an infection developed behind. After two or three days of extreme pain, pressure and hearing loss in this left ear, tinnitus started to

emerge. She hears a hiss, much like the sea, or white noise, which is there all the time. Sometimes she hears tones. When it is very loud, these are very prominent.

Initially Isobel had a complete breakdown. She slept for barely more than an hour a night for the first two months because of the noise. She was desperate and confused. The pressure, which had built up because of the blocked wax, made even the smallest of sounds hurt because of the vibrations on her ear drum, which was being constricted. She had to speak in whispers because of that as well. Eventually this calmed, and so has the noise, but initially she had absolutely no idea what to do to make things better.

She visited her GP as soon as she had the wax blockage and infection but didn't find her very helpful. She didn't understand why Isobel was finding it so hard with the pain, pressure and hearing loss and the GP said she wouldn't be able to extract the wax for two weeks. So Isobel walked into the ENT emergency ward at her local hospital and they removed the wax then and there. That made a big difference but when she still had tinnitus afterwards and was finding it very difficult, her GP put her on medication to help her sleep and sent her for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. These things managed to help somewhat, but they didn't in themselves help her to move on and accept the condition.

Isobel then went to see an ENT specialist at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. He referred her on to a hearing therapist. Isobel believes that together they went some way to saving her life. Isobel says: "I'm not sure what I would have done without their help. Through a combination of white noise sound therapy and talking therapy, I was able to change my perception of the sounds I was hearing from frightening and unwanted to something that was like any other part of my body. It's just there. It's now part of who I am".

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Tinnitus, Stress and the Temporo-Mandibular Joint (TMJ)

Ben aged 44 lives in Lancashire. Ben moved to New Zealand in 2009 where he took up a teaching position at Whangaparaoa College in Auckland.

The first two years went well but the changes started in March/April 2011 when Ben developed a pain in his right ear and throat. He went to the GP who said not to worry it would be a minor infection and gave Ben some antibiotics. But Ben started to get increasingly stressed about the pain. Several trips to the hospital brought no answers. Ben felt alone and confused. His relationship with his wife and children became unbearable and he had more and more time off work.

Ben searched the internet for answers and came across a dentist in Auckland who specialized in TMJ. He went to see him and he tested Ben, and diagnosed him with TMJ dysfunction, a condition affecting the jaw joint through stress, it all fell into place. The dentist said some patients developed tinnitus from the treatment but the number was small. Ben had to wear a hard splint for a couple of days and then he heard whistles in his right ear. After it had been there for the first few days he lost the plot. At night he would cry and sob. Eventually he would sleep through sheer exhaustion.

Ben discarded the splint and sought help from a counsellor. The tools for relaxation, breathing etc were invaluable and, he felt, lifesaving. By October 2012 Ben and his family decided to move back to the UK. His symptoms physically had changed to a feeling of fullness in the ear as if he had a blocked ear. After talking to his GP in the UK, Ben was referred to a maxiofacial consultant. He set him up with another splint but this time a soft one which cushioned his jaw. After a few weeks it started to relieve the TMJ symptoms and the tinnitus started to back away.

Ben realised his tinnitus was definitely linked to his stress levels like a volume dial, when he was stressed it went up, when he was more relaxed it backed down and it went hand in hand with his TMJ symptoms. Ben told the BTA: "It now only bothers me sometimes in the evening when it's quiet and it has become part of me". Ben now lives a normal life and is continuing to rebuild with a smile and the support of his whole family.

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How alternative therapies helped Tracy

Tracy, aged 39 lives in Berkshire. Two years ago Tracy was woken by a ringing sound in her left ear. Three days later she made a doctor's appointment as the ringing was starting to concern her and even scare her. The doctor said the ringing was down to an ear infection and would probably go within two weeks.

Then she started to hear buzzing, humming, whirring and something she can only describe as a washing machine on full spin! At this point she was a mess having not slept properly for nights and she resorted to taking sleeping tablets. Tracy was not eating or drinking and made the mistake of reading the horror stories on the internet about tinnitus which depressed, distressed and disturbed her more than ever. She went back to the doctors and cried her heart out begging him to help her make the noises in my ears stop. She was very afraid that the noises would stay with her for the rest of her life. Luckily for Tracy and her family she found the BTA website; she told her story on the BTA forum and the response she received was remarkable. Tracy said: "People shared their stories and suddenly I had a network of people who knew exactly what I was going through. In those early days I found great comfort in these people and was quite shocked as to just how many there were living with tinnitus. The advice on the website was of great use to me".

Then completely out of the blue a colleague of Tracys told her how she was part of a Reiki group and how she went to a Reiki Master for healing. Tracy knew straight away that she had to see this lady and in August 2011, she went along for her first Reiki session. In her session the Reiki Master put her hands over Tracy's ears and the volume level reduced. That moment changed her life forever because for the first time in five months, she felt like she was in control.

Tracy told the BTA: "Since that magical day I have since practised Reiki myself and have completed Reiki levels 1 & 2. Reiki has given me a new lease of life and I would never had found it if it was not for my tinnitus. Today to keep my tinnitus under control I perform Reiki on myself and I also receive another holistic treatment called Bowen. Both of these alternative forms of healing keep me in control. My ambition in life is to do my Reiki Masters and treat tinnitus sufferers just like me".

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Cognitive Behavioural Therapy helped Ali regain control

Ali aged 40 lives in Hertfordshire. Ali was around 19 years old when she first realised she had tinnitus. She had real trouble sleeping and also found herself listening out for the tinnitus during the day, so in quiet times in the house or the office where she worked, she could still hear it.

After being referred to a hearing specialist she was then eventually seen at her local hospital, Ali explained that the ringing in her ears was destroying her confidence and making her feel quite desperate and depressed. Ali told the BTA: “At 19 years old, which is what I think an important time in a teenagers life, a time you should be out enjoying yourself, I was told under no circumstances should I “ever go anywhere noisy/never go to a concert /never go to a noisy bar/not go to clubs and pubs or cinema/avoid at all costs loud noise”. I was told that in extreme circumstances only I could go for short periods to noisy places, but I would have to wear foam ear plugs to protect my sensitive hearing”. She resigned herself to a life where she could not do the things she loved unless she wore ear plugs, and from that moment on, in any noisy social situation, she wore them because she was so fearful that she would do herself more damage.

Eventually over time Ali accepted the situation and was able to get back to a normal sleeping pattern and ignore the tinnitus. All went very well until around two years later she started to find even normal every day sounds very loud. Ali said: “It started when I realised that when I was watching TV I could hear the emission sound from it more than the sound of the TV itself, and over the course of a few months, everything became too loud for me – so much so that even my family having dinner and cutting food on their plates became excruciating for me. I stopped going out and eventually under duress, visited the doctors who prescribed antidepressants and referred me this time to Hillingdon Hospital for an appointment with a specialist consultant there. The appointment was around a month later, and during this time I was signed off work as I was too upset and tired (from lack of sleep from listening to my tinnitus) to function”.

Ali saw a consultant who told her the advice she originally been given was incorrect, and because she’d worn the ear plugs for so long, her ears had not been exposed to normal levels of sound and then became so sensitive that it was painful for me, something called Hyperacusis. Over the course of a couple of months, Ali had weekly sessions with a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) counsellor who had tinnitus herself and gradually she was able to retrain her brain to ignore the tinnitus and she felt 100% better within a few months. Ali believes the CBT really helped her regain control of her life and her tinnitus.

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Alan's experience of tinnitus and deafness after chemotherapy

Alan aged 63 lives in Edinburgh. Alan has had tinnitus and deafness since February 1984 when he had three operations to remove tumours and had to start chemotherapy. He became aware of a buzzing in his ears. Up to that point his hearing had always been very good. He had been warned of something like a 5% risk of damage to his hearing which seemed fairly insignificant alongside all the other unpleasant side effects which he experienced. Alan said: "I was literally fighting on too many other fronts to have to worry unduly about the tinnitus. I went on to have further major trans-abdominal surgery to my abdomen and surgery to my neck before I was able to contemplate a staged return to work later that year (1984)".

Alan's tinnitus has, from day one, been in the form of an unrelenting zzzzzzzzz with a concomitant troublesome loss of hearing. Alan told the BTA: "This has been a significant and very stressful handicap at work (I worked as a lawyer in the NHS, with regular appearances in court and Tribunals) and socially and personally but you just have to get through it, make the best of it. I did acquire after a few years a fairly good set of hearing aids which helped a lot. The tinnitus is always with me but it knows its place!"

Alan finds he gets frustrated and annoyed and he misses out on things like the cinema and a lot of theatre and he needs subtitles for television but he says in the great scheme of things he can live with that. He has an understanding wife and good, considerate friends which is the important thing. Alan's message to others is to be patient and retain perspective on tinnitus.

The BTA has a selection of tinnitus case studies which are available upon request. If you would like to get in touch with anyone featured here, or would like to have other examples sent to you to help the BTA promote Tinnitus Awareness during February 2014, please contact Emily Broomhead emily@tinnitus.org.uk or Nic Wray nic@tinnitus.org.uk.

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