

What to Do When Everyday Sounds Are Too Loud (Not related to using hearing aids)

*Bill Smith is bothered by **everyday sounds**. (This problem is sometimes called **hyperacusis**.) Kitchen sounds and the vacuum cleaner are too loud for him. He is bothered by road noise when he drives. It seems like everything at church is too loud. What should Bill do? Believe it or not, being around more sound can make things **better!** And, staying away from sound can make his problem **worse!** What??? He should add **more sound**??? Keep reading and we'll explain...*

There are three things you can do if everyday sounds are too loud for you.

1. Keep yourself surrounded with sound that is comfortable for you.
2. Listen to sounds that you enjoy as often as you can.
3. Only wear hearing protection when you really need to.

1. Keep yourself surrounded with sound that is comfortable for you.

Why should I keep myself surrounded with sound? Let's start by thinking about your eyes and how they adjust to light. Imagine sitting in a dark movie theater and then going outside into the daylight. Everything seems brighter to you than it does to people who were not sitting in the dark. Your eyes had adjusted to the dark and now they have to readjust to the daylight.

Your ears adjust to sound like your eyes adjust to light. If you stay away from sound, your ears will slowly adjust to the quiet. After a while, everyday sounds will seem louder and harder to tolerate. Avoiding sound will only make the problem worse.

If you keep yourself surrounded with sound, your ears will readjust. It will slowly become easier for you to tolerate everyday sounds. You should only use sounds that are comfortable for you. It usually takes at least a few weeks of being around sound for this change to happen.

How do I keep myself surrounded with sound? You can use any sound that is not annoying (the sound can be either neutral or pleasant). Here are some ideas:

- Listen to music at a comfortable level
- Listen to radio shows
- Play recordings of nature sounds
- Keep a fan running
- Use a tabletop water fountain

Another choice: Some people wear small instruments in their ears that make a "shhh" sound. These instruments are called *in-the-ear noise generators* or *maskers*. Your audiologist can tell you more about them.

2. Listen to sounds that you enjoy as often as you can.

Why should I listen to sounds that I enjoy as often as I can? We just talked about the problem of everyday sounds being too loud (*hyperacusis*). Many people also have another problem. They just *don't like* certain sounds, but *not because they are too loud*. (This problem is sometimes called *misophonia*.) If you don't like certain sounds, you

should make a point of listening to sounds that you enjoy. Spending time enjoying sound can help you get better at tolerating everyday sounds that you don't like.

3. Only wear hearing protection when you really need to.

Why should I use ear protection *only* when I really need to? When everyday sounds seem too loud, some people start using ear protection all the time. Remember that avoiding sound will make the problem worse. Only use ear protection when sounds are dangerously loud or uncomfortably loud. *As soon* as the sound around you is at a safe and comfortable level, take the ear protection off. The goal is to wear ear protection *only when needed*.

Use earplugs or earmuffs *only* when:

- sounds around you are uncomfortably loud
- you are around dangerously loud sounds like:
 - lawn mowers
 - loud concerts
 - power tools
 - guns
 - etc.

Is there any research?

Yes. In 2002 Formby, Sherlock, and Gold¹ studied *sound tolerance*.

- There were two groups of people:
 1. One group wore earplugs for 2 weeks
 2. The other group wore in-the-ear sound generators (maskers) that make a “shhh” sound
- After 2 weeks:
 - The people who wore earplugs could tolerate *less* sound than before
 - The people who wore sound generators could tolerate *more* sound than before
- This study showed that:
 - Adding sound makes it easier to tolerate sound
 - Staying in quiet makes it harder to tolerate sound

Bottom line

If everyday sounds bother you:

- Surrounding yourself with comfortable sound will help
- Avoiding sound will make the problem worse

How long does it take?

It can take weeks or months for your ears to adjust.

Talk to your audiologist if you have any questions.

¹Formby C, Sherlock LP, Gold SL (2002). Adaptive calibration of chronic auditory gain: Interim findings. In R. Patuzzi (Ed.), Proceedings of the VIIth International Tinnitus Seminar (pp. 165-69). Crawley: University of Western Australia.