Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Isn't About Resignation

How the Originator of This Widely Acclaimed Therapy Views Tinnitus

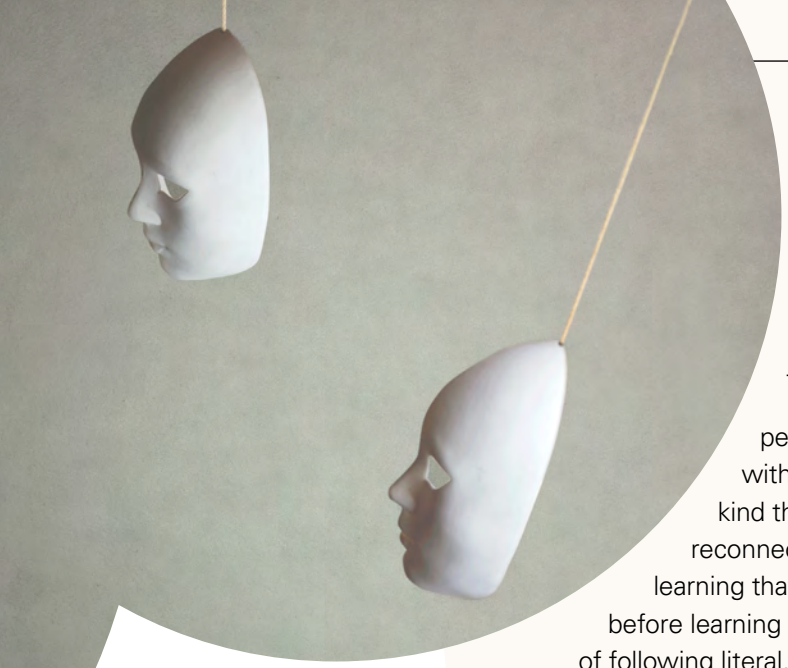
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) falls under the umbrella of third-wave cognitive behavioral therapies, which the 2023 Spring issue of *Tinnitus Today* highlighted. Although ACT, along with Dialectical Behavior Therapy and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, shares certain similarities grounded in traditional cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), there are important differences. ACT emphasizes values-based action, mindfulness and acceptance techniques, and flexible thinking, as opposed to trying to change or control difficult thoughts and emotions, which is part of traditional CBT.

As the field of psychology continues to evolve with ongoing research, the ATA is highlighting ACT as a therapeutic option for individuals struggling with tinnitus because it's a tool—within third-wave CBT—that is evidence based yet not widely utilized within the tinnitus community. Its originator, Steven C. Hayes, PhD, also lives with tinnitus, so we asked him to share his experience with the condition and how ACT can help facilitate the transition from bothersome tinnitus to non-bothersome tinnitus.

Joy Onozuka: *As someone who struggled numerous years with tinnitus, what would you say to the person who cannot fathom the possibility of tinnitus receding from conscious awareness?*

Steven Hayes, PhD: It seems impossible because the part of you that is evaluating whether it can be done is the part of you that can't do it. All of us know there is more to us than our literal, judgmental, predictive, evaluative, problem-solving mind, but if you seriously ask yourself, "Is there more to me than my literal, judgmental, predictive, evaluative, problem-solving mind?" that same mode of mind will be the part answering yes or no or maybe.

> ***"…You can discover how to handle tinnitus using methods of 'learning by doing' that are more like how you came to be able to walk than how you came to be able to solve a math problem."***



But that part of you is not the whole person called "you." Your judgmental mind is not the person who knows how to love, to dance, to throw a ball, or to play soulful music. It's not the person who knows how to gaze at a beautiful sunset or to meditate without entanglement in judgment.

And it's not the whole person who can learn how to handle tinnitus.

There is more to you than language and cognition. You can learn solely by experience. You have a spiritual aspect. You are part of a human community. You can pick a direction in life. Only you as a whole person can choose to attend or not, to care or not, to feed judgment or not.

The guidance people need to deal with tinnitus is the kind that allows you to reconnect with a way of learning that you once knew before learning came to be a matter of following literal, analytic rules. We can then apply that method of learning to this very subtle Zen task of what to do with an endless noise.

Uncounted others before you have learned it and now we have science as an additional guide. There is a way forward.

JO: *How and why does ACT have the ability to neutralize a sound that can be perceived if one pays attention to it, consciously or not? And once the sound becomes hooked to one's stress response, how does one unplug from that?*

SH: The sound is hooked to a threat response. Your judgmental mind thinks the sound is inherently *aversive* or *bad* or *awful* or *unacceptable* or *dangerous*. It thinks these qualities are in the sound itself. The Dictator Within (that judgmental internal voice that gives us all a constant stream of behavioral guidance based on evaluation and prediction of events) tells you that the sound needs to be eliminated or at least diminished—it needs to be controlled. That is totally unhelpful advice, but once tagged in that way (and given your affirmation as a person), a situation is created in which the sound is a threat that needs to be managed. And once it is established as a threat of that kind, your body and brain will do what it does based on millions of years of evolution that go back far, far longer than human language itself. Your entire physical being will mobilize to manage the threat.

Boom. The trap has been sprung.

Even when you are not noticing it for some moments, your mind will scan for the threat. We all call it "stress from the noise," but it's actually more complex than that. The threat came from the sound, yes, but also from judgment *and* (most subtle of all) from the larger social and mental context of how to handle your own experience that led you to affirm the relevance of the judgments.

The social/mental context of deliberate control tricked you into an unnecessary and unhelpful *action*. You likely did not notice that context and you did not notice that you did anything with the automatic judgment that showed up when your ears started to ring because it all happened

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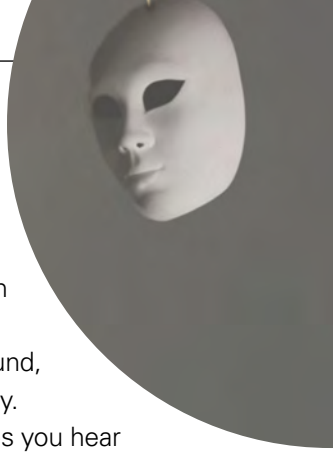

so fast and automatically. Heck, I didn't notice it.

Saying that is not meant to be blaming—it's not your fault. It is your responsibility, however. Do not flinch from that! Knowing you are responsible can be a wonderful thing because it means that you now have the ability to respond. Woo-hoo! You are not helpless. You are not hopeless. You are not a victim.

You can become aware of how you got tricked into doing unhelpful things by a pervasive social/mental context, and your previously unseen affirmation that led to a noise being a threat can be withdrawn. Once there, you can discover how to handle tinnitus using methods of "learning by doing" that are more like how you came to be able to walk than how you came to be able to solve a math problem.

ACT (which, by the way, is said as a word, not as three letters) stands for "Acceptance and Commitment Therapy" (or "Acceptance and Commitment Training" when used outside of a psychotherapy context—"ACT" in either case) and combines self-kindness and mindfulness with values and commitment. ACT is perhaps the most researched new method of psychological intervention over the last 20 years, with well over a thousand randomized controlled trials in almost every area of human functioning you can think of. You can see the controlled intervention trials here: bit.ly/ACTRCTs. There are thousands of ACT studies of other kinds. That is important to know not just because it means that what I am saying is evidence based but also because it's cool to know that the skills you can learn by applying ACT to tinnitus will be helpful to you in other places of your life.

What ACT focuses on is something subtly different from "changing your mind." What ACT helps you do is to respectfully decline the relevance of the command instructions issued by that voice within by changing the mental context from one of agreement and compliance, or disagreement and noncompliance, to one of appreciation and choice.

The Dictator Within is not you—it is just a tool within you. It is often useful—be thankful you have it. I would not want to do my taxes without it. But sometimes it is not helpful, and either way it is not you—it is just a tool you have (that sometimes rudely claims to *be* you. Ha!). *You* get to decide if or how that tool will be used. You do not get to decide what it says. You cannot argue it into silence. It's more like, "Thank you very much for the advice, Mr. Mind. Thanks for trying to help me. However, no need to do anything in this instance—I've got this covered."

That mental shift—once you learn how to make it in a profound way—removes the tinnitus sound as a threat so that you and your body can then go back to treating the sound as a sound, period, end of story.

Then sometimes you hear it and sometimes you don't, and either way it lands in the same way. It's not of particular interest. Said in another way, you don't care. You don't even care that you don't care. You respectfully decline the mind's insistence that you must care.

I know this sounds like psychobabble. If your mind is telling you *that* while reading these words, it's certainly understandable. But if it is, before you give that judgment full control over you by yet another act of affirmation, do remember this is the same mind of yours that walked you into a struggle with tinnitus in the first place. Ha! Should Mr. Smarty-Pants Mind be given such automatic power over you given its spotty record?

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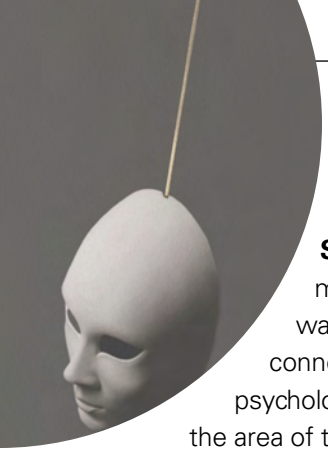
JO: *When you discovered how quickly ACT could reduce tinnitus distress, how and when did you begin conducting research on ACT for tinnitus? What did the research show?*



SH: I wrote about my experience and was lucky enough to connect with the best psychology researcher in the area of tinnitus: Gerhard Andersson at Uppsala University in Sweden. He quickly became interested and has done several trials of ACT and has created measures of tinnitus acceptance and values-based activity engagement. I'm an author on some of them, but really the work has been done by my colleague and friend.

I describe the basic principles of ACT and how they can be applied to managing tinnitus in "ACT as a Tool to Create Psychological Flexibility: Untether the Mind From Tinnitus," which can be found on page 8.

JO: *Are there specific ACT techniques or exercises that are particularly effective in helping people manage tinnitus-related distress?*

SH: We've not unpacked the ACT package in this area with what are called "component analyses," but we do know that with tinnitus both letting go of needless emotional control and making a choice to actively engage in life with ringing ears if and when you have ringing ears are important. In other similar areas, such as in chronic pain, all six elements of psychological flexibility are known to be important.

JO: *What do you say to a person who is skeptical or resistant to the idea of acceptance-based approaches to tinnitus since some people perceive "acceptance" as being resigned to tinnitus and a reduced quality of life?*

SH: You will notice that I said ACT combines self-kindness and mindfulness with values and commitment. I said it that way to avoid the word "acceptance." I usually do not avoid that word. I did that here because there are some conditions in life such as chronic pain or tinnitus where "acceptance" is used in the culture to mean "you have to put up with it," and that is a poisonous idea. Often people throw that word at tinnitus sufferers as a kind of dismissal. It's like, "In this area, I don't like feeling what I feel when I see you feel what you feel, so why don't you stop feeling what you feel so I don't have to feel what I feel?" In other words, it's people asking you to stop being bothered or at least stop talking about it because they can't do anything and that's distressing to them. Thus, the words "you just have to accept it!" Yuck.

But we do use "acceptance" in another way. If you are giving a precious gift to someone (your grandmother's ring, say), sometimes as you give such a thing you might say, "Here, will you accept this?" You do not mean "will you *resign yourself* to having such a gift?" or "will you *tolerate* my grandmother's ring?" Not at all! You mean "will you receive this willingly?"

That little bit of English usage is still in our culture because the Latin root of *acceptance* includes the connotation of active receiving, as if to receive a gift. And that is what ACT is about. To receive the gift of feeling, sensing, thinking, and remembering.

You might think that ringing in the ears is hardly a "gift." Well, okay, but haven't you noticed in your life how really difficult things often teach you major life lessons? Are you saying this cannot be true in this case? A recent study found that a fairly large number of tinnitus sufferers *do* learn positive things from it. I'm not talking about the power of positive thinking—I'm talking about engaging with this whole issue in a new way, with a "well, let's see" attitude.

JO: *Is ACT effective if someone is struggling with depression, anxiety, or insomnia because of the sound?*

SH: These same skills are known to be powerful methods for addressing all these problems. There are over 400 meta-analyses of ACT (bit.ly/ACTmetas), including all of these areas. So, the cool thing about ACT for tinnitus is that you will be learning very broadly applicable skills that will help your life in many areas.

"ACT targets processes of emotional openness, softening entangling judgment, and fostering presence from a deeper sense of self…"