Fibromyalgia and Noise Sensitivity

by SARAH BORIEN

Dealing With Noise Sensitivity

As I write today's article, I'm sitting in my living room in total silence. This is a rarity for me; there's normally the sound of people in the house or the TV in the background, and if I'm home alone then I'll normally play some music while I work.

Today though, I wanted to see how I felt writing in silence — especially as I'm writing about the impact of noise on fibromyalgia.

It felt eerily quiet when I turned off the TV, but before long the sound of the traffic outside and the people in the flat next door were all I could hear. In fact, those background noises jumped to the foreground and they were suddenly very loud. Right now I'm contemplating putting the TV back on just to drown out those other sounds.

Noise has a big impact on a lot of fibromyalgia patients. We experience heightened sensitivity to touch, light, smells, temperature and noise. Noise can increase our pain, cause headaches and leave us feeling exhausted. So why does noise affect us in this way, and how can we cope?

Distraction

I'm easily distracted and not very good at focusing, so the smallest noise or change to noise patterns will stop me in my tracks. That's partly because I suffer from anxiety, so sudden noises make me flinch, but it's partly because it interrupts a state of calm I'm trying desperately hard to achieve.

All those times I'm trying to relax, unwind or rest, the change in noise interrupts me. I stop feeling relaxed and instead my mind is engaged in whatever is happening next door or outside. This can be really frustrating, especially when you're trying to take control of your condition and block out the outside world.

The solution, though easier said than done, is to keep practicing and learn to block out those external noises. Learning to meditate is an effective way of doing this, or so I'm told, and over time you can learn to center yourself and block out the surrounding noise.

Migraine

I've suffered from migraine for over 20 years, and noise is one of the most powerful triggers. Migraine is also a common symptom for fibromyalgia patients, so it's likely that many of you will be experiencing some form of intense headache as a result of heightened sensitivity.

There are some environments that just aren't good for migraine sufferers; football matches, music concerts, loud meetings/debates, the theater/cinema, children's playgroup — the list goes on.

A few years ago I was looking at a new career. I spent a week in a school for children with autism. The week was completely rewarding and everything I had hoped it would be, and I felt really confident about my new step.

That was until I realized I'd had a migraine almost every day. I'd put it down to stress to begin with but soon realized that shouting over noisy children in the hallway, classroom, lunch room — it was exhausting, and I knew I wasn't a person who could cope with that level of noise every day.

One of my family members suffers from ME and migraine. He finds the powerful elevated noise in a theater or cinema so sharp that it triggers his migraine every time. Over the years he's realized he can no longer watch films and plays in the arena they are intended — he can't cope with it.

It's not the case for everyone, but if you're someone who notices increased head pain in relation to increased noise then you need to take yourself out of these situations. I'm not suggesting you run away — it's always worth trying these things on more than one occasion — but if it repeatedly causes you pain then it may mean a career change for you or a change to your weekend hobby.

Sometimes that realization can be quite devastating, but it is nonetheless essential if you want to gain control over your pain.

Exhaustion

There are some noises that will be painful to your ears, whether you have fibromyalgia or not. That ambulance siren, the pneumatic drill in the pavement, the screaming baby in the waiting room — anyone who can hear is likely to flinch at these sounds. But fibromyalgia patients are likely to do more than flinch.

Not only is the sound likely to cause us physical pain, but they take their toll on our mental state as well. Our bodies tense at these sharp sounds and we struggle to remain calm or relaxed around heightened noise.

We're also exhausted; fibro fatigue means we're less able to remain strong and deal with these noises rationally. We don't have the physical strength or the mental strength to ignore the sounds like our non-fibro friends might.

The familiar coping strategies for fibromyalgia will help with them. Remaining well-rested and doing gentle exercise is one good way of trying to balance your fatigue. Positive energy in your body makes you stronger and more capable of dealing with these strains.

The Voice in Your Head

Noise isn't always about what's going on around you — sometimes it's about what's going on inside. The voice in my head is noise I can often do without. She's the voice that pushes me forward and keeps me going, but she's the also the voice that tells me I'm useless and holds me back. Silencing that noise is an important part of dealing with pain so that you can move forward, cope better, and be stronger.

Meditation can often help with this, but so can the creation of a retreat or hideaway. For those of us who struggle with meditation, going to a part of the house or somewhere in your local community that gives you a sense of calm and peace can help to silence the noise in your head.

Find Good Noise

Not all noise is bad. Sometimes the ticking clock or the hum of the dehumidifier (two irritating sounds I am battling with as I write this article) can create more frustration, distraction or pain than the noise of TV or the radio.

Find a station that you enjoy listening to or a piece of music you love, and use it as a way to block out the more negative noises. Sometimes one person's noise can be the sound that eases someone else's pain.