

A Hissy Fit about Noise-induced Hearing Loss

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Standing in the line-up of Tim Horton's, Canada's coffee-shop shrine, I heard the music leaking from the earbuds of the teenager behind me. And if I heard it with *my* severe hearing loss, it must have been *really* loud.

I grumbled to myself, and not only because the noise was irritatingly tinny and nothing I could sing along with. And I didn't need my hearing to know there was some seriously poor listening behaviour going down. I could see the tell-tale signs: earbud wires trailing down his jacket, the bobbing head, shoulders jabbing to the beat, and a faraway look in his eyes.

I threw a silent hissy fit because here *I* am, treating every shred of residual hearing like a precious gift, and there *he* is, a kid willing to throw away his perfect hearing for cheap volume thrills! I did nothing to cause my hearing loss which affects every aspect of my life, while he's doing everything possible to bring on full-scale, future noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) in *his*. It makes me crazy!

According to a major recent survey, one in five teenagers now has some degree of hearing loss, an increase of 30% over the previous decade! Noise damage is believed to be a major culprit in this shocking surge in teen hearing loss.

To be fair, our young man probably doesn't realize the damage he's doing. Has anyone explained the consequences to him, in his language? How can we blame him for using technology that is available, affordable and sexy, and which comes with no visible 'user beware'? How is he to know that once those hair cells are destroyed, they're gone for good, and that no medicine, group therapy or community service hours will bring them back? How will it sink in that by pounding his hearing, day after day, with too much loud noise, he's kissing his hearing goodbye?

Should I say something to help this young man, whose hearing is in mortal danger? Often I do, but on this day I held back, partly out of respect for his personal choices, and partly because of the crowded line-up of people with nothing better to do but listen in.

But, while I waited for my coffee, I thought of what I would *love* to say.

[Intro] "Excuse me, could you turn it down a bit? But if you insist on giving us an ear concert, could you play something we all like?"

[Taking the Plunge] "Say, are you *trying* to destroy your hearing? Keep it up and you'll be swapping those earbuds for hearing aids by the time you hit the big three-oh!"

[Big Finale] "And don't give me that look, young man, because I *know* what I'm talking about! I'm hard of hearing, and that's no picnic! So, do yourself a favour and turn it down. While you're at it, lose the earbuds, too! Oh, and have a nice day."

He may have told me where to go, but I bet you the other people in line would have applauded.

Let's shout out about NIHL! It's time to include hearing loss prevention in the school health curriculum. In a recent MTV.com survey, 61% of teens said they listened to music at dangerous levels, had never received the prevention message, and would wear earplugs if their doctors told them to.

Our governments need to understand the long-term social and economic costs of a population plagued with hearing loss. Most hearing-related organizations include some information about noise and prevention on their websites. But what will drive our youth to those websites? Safe listening behaviour needs to be taught in every elementary school, with programs like Dangerous Decibels and Sound Sense. At the high school level, we need to ramp up the message and the urgency. In a focus group about NIHL, young people had this to say: *"OMG, what we're doing is self-mutilation! In order to get through to us, you need to scare us, freak us out!"*

So, let's start a collective freak-out about the need to protect the hearing we have (or have left).

I don't want my 16-year old son and his generation to live, unnecessarily, with the hearing challenges that are my daily reality. And if they are armed with an ounce of knowledge and five grams of earplugs, they won't have to.