

Canadian Audiologist

The Official Publication of the Canadian Academy of Audiology

Why Do We Like Noise

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Published July 2, 2019



In this article we will be talking about the kind of noise defined as unwanted sound. Not the noise of the waves lapping the sand of the beach or the rustling of leaves moved by the breeze. Not even of the babbling of the crowd at a public event. Most of us will agree that even if unwanted, those are somehow pleasant noises. This is not the case of noise generated by motorcycles, construction and industrial equipment, and airplanes. Besides being unpleasant, these noises tend to be loud.

Most of us will agree that noise is bad for our health. It is bad for our hearing, bad for our blood pressure and our education system. It negatively affects our psyche, reduces speech intelligibility and can make sleeping impossible.

Most often hearing healthcare professionals focus on the effect related to hearing from long exposures to high level noise. We make presentations and write articles on that topic. We often play back fragments of music or speech that mimic hearing loss such as that experienced by hard of hearing people. We do that in front of attentive audiences, so that every one can realize how the hearing deteriorates when exposed to loud noises and how terrible it sounds to the listener.

There is enough material to convince the entire human race that hearing is precious and is worth conserving. We even have federal and provincial legislation and regulations limiting the exposure to noise.

However, things change when the issue are noise levels below the legislated limits: Industrial or otherwise. When the issue is not hearing hazard, it appears that noise is not a problem worth considering.



Let's start with everyday life experience on the road. How about motorcycles driving without silencers or even with devices that amplify the noise from the exhausts? Have we had enough of them? Then we have cars, trucks and buses with the same problem. And that is despite the fact that hordes of engineers at car factories are trying to make vehicles quieter. To top it all, there are the water jet skis and motor boats; a real nightmare for the cottagers.

Other notoriously noisy places are eateries such as restaurants, cafeterias and food courts. In how many of them one can maintain a decent conversation without yelling? To make things even worst,

many eating places increase the cacophony by adding music, live or amplified. We are bombarded with noise, generated not only by teenagers for teenagers, but by people of all ages, nationalities, and cultures.

The issue is that we, the hearing conservationists, are left to preach to the converted; other colleagues, hearing conservationists, safety officers and other hearing health care professionals.

What about research, standards, and enforcement? Well, the list of research facilities independent or part of universities is quite large as is the roster of distinguished professionals involved in activities related to noise and its effects. National and international institutions provide standards regarding noise assessment, measurement instruments, and measuring techniques. Different agencies deal with enforcement of law and regulations, and the infrastructure for dealing with hazardous and annoying noise is here to be applied.



Where we have done a pretty good job in controlling the noise exposure is in the workplace. Excellent hearing conservation programs have been developed. We have safety officers trained in measuring and assessing the hearing hazard. Large colourful signs advise workers and visitors alike to wear hearing protectors which hang prominently at the entrance of the hazardous areas. An army of audiologists, audiometric technicians and nurses control periodically workers' hearing and provide advice on how to conserve it. Periodic training sessions reinforce the basic principles. We even insist on the fact that noise is noise independent of whether it is experienced at work, at leisure or during recreation. Finally, Hearing Conservation Programs have provisions for what to do with workers who insist on endangering their hearing by not wearing their hearing protectors.

So, where have we gone wrong? Is it inherent to human nature to enjoy noise? Todd and Cuddy,^{1,2}

claim precisely that. Probably their theory of a physiological basis for enjoying noise is worth exploring further. Is there also a psychological reason that could explain the reason behind our failure to convince people that “noise is bad for your health”?

We know that noise is not the only fatal attraction. There is smoking, alcohol, and drug use among other things that are known to be “bad” and are still used extensively. Obviously, the education is important, but not sufficient.

We have to find the reason why people love noise and then do something about it. Only then we will be able to orient our efforts and become real hearing conservationists!

¹Todd Neil and Cuddy Frederick: Vestibular responses to loud dance music: A physiological basis of the "rock and roll threshold"? J. Audio Eng. Soc. 43~4!, 251–266 ~1995

²Todd Neil: Evidence for a behavioral significance of saccular acoustic sensitivity in humans. J. Acoust. Soc. Am., Vol. 110, No. 1, July 2001