

# M & M?

Mills & McKinney  
Hearing Practice



# Changing negative thinking about tinnitus

**Cognitive distortions are ways that our mind convinces us of something that isn't really true. These inaccurate thoughts are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions — telling ourselves things that sound rational and accurate, but really only serve to keep us feeling bad about tinnitus. Of course, the worse you feel about tinnitus, the more likely you are to find it intrusive.**

For instance, a person might tell themselves, "If I hear tinnitus it will be dreadful. If I stop hearing tinnitus it will be wonderful". This is an example of "black or white" (or polarized) thinking. The person is only seeing things in absolutes — that any tinnitus that they hear is awful and not hearing tinnitus is the only way forward.

Of course, the aim of retraining therapy is to change these thinking distortions about tinnitus, leading to becoming less reactive to tinnitus, and thereby promoting filtering it out or habituating to it. If this happens, you will become less aware of your tinnitus, and less troubled by it if you do hear it.

By learning to correctly identify negative thinking about tinnitus you can then answer the negative thinking back and refute it. By refuting the negative thinking over and over again, it will slowly diminish overtime and be automatically replaced by more rational, balanced thinking. If this happens, you can start to habituate to tinnitus.

The diagram below shows what happens when negative thinking is applied to tinnitus – it gets more intrusive – and what happens when you begin re-interpreting tinnitus – it becomes less intrusive.



## Common Cognitive Distortions

In 1976, psychologist Aaron Beck first proposed the theory behind cognitive distortions and in the 1980s, David Burns was responsible for popularizing it with common names and examples for the distortions. Some of the common ones that apply to negative thinking about tinnitus are listed below.

### 1. Filtering

A person engaging in mental filtering takes the negative details and magnifies those details while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail about their tinnitus and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted. When a cognitive filter is applied, the person sees only the negative and ignores anything positive.

### 2. Polarized Thinking (or “Black and White” Thinking)

In polarized thinking, things are either “black-or-white” — all or nothing. We have to be perfect or we’re a complete and abject failure — there is no middle ground. For Example, “I can’t lead a normal life until my tinnitus goes away completely.”

A person with polarized thinking places people, situations or tinnitus in “either/or” categories, with no shades of grey or allowing for the complexity of most people and most situations. A person with black-and-white thinking sees things only in extremes.

### 3. Overgeneralization

In this cognitive distortion, a person comes to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens just once, they expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

For instance, if you have a period of time when the tinnitus is particularly intrusive, you assume that it will always be like that and you will never get better.

A big part of overgeneralising is projecting into the future – how my tinnitus is now is how it will always be.

## 4. Catastrophizing

When a person engages in catastrophizing, they expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as magnifying, and can also come out in its opposite behavior, minimizing. In this distortion, a person hears about tinnitus and uses what if questions (e.g., "What if my tinnitus gets worse?" "What will happen to me?") to imagine the absolute worst occurring.

For example, a person might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as a slight change in their tinnitus). Or they may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (for example, not acknowledge success in changing beliefs, or using relaxation techniques regularly).

*With practice, you can learn to answer each of these cognitive distortions.*

Our tinnitus management aims to help you to understand tinnitus as a very weak signal that is amplified within the auditory pathways because of the way that you are thinking about it and reacting to it. We help you to identify the cognitive distortions that are taking place, and talk them through with you.

### **Ask yourself:**

- What is the evidence for thinking the way I do?
- Are there any alternative views – what would someone else think?
- What is the effect of this cognitive distortion?
- Can I alter the way I think to something more rational and balanced?

Remember, you are aiming to hear tinnitus but not react to it. The more you can do this, the quicker you will habituate to it, and the more your tinnitus will be filtered out as meaningless.

### **Further information**

[You may also find our other Resources helpful.](#)

The British Tinnitus Association also has some useful information. You can find this at <https://www.tinnitus.org.uk>

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