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Article

Do you Hear what I Hear? A Qualitative Study Examining Psychological Associations Underlying Evaluations of Everyday Sounds in Patients with Chronic Tinnitus

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Abstract:

Background: Tinnitus, a complex phenomenon influenced by psychological, audiological, and medical factors, is increasingly studied as a distinct condition rather than a mere symptom. Research delving into individuals' perceptions and experiences of living with tinnitus is expanding, shedding light on its multifaceted nature.

Methods: This study examines associations induced by neutral sounds among chronic tinnitus patients, focusing on how they attribute meaning to such sounds. Employing Mayring's content analysis, we explore the psychological associations underlying valence ratings of everyday neutral sounds. Nine tinnitus patients participated in a hearing exercise involving seven neutral sounds, followed by semi-structured interviews to examine their associations. Three groups of factors—*affect*, *episodic memory*, and *'other'*—influenced patients' associations and valence ratings of neutral sounds, with the former two factors comprising subcategories. Our findings suggest that neutral auditory stimuli evoke strong affective reactions, possibly by serving as retrieval cues for episodic memories, consistent with previous psychoaudiological research.

Results: Evidence-based therapies for tinnitus are shifting towards personalized interventions tailored to individual needs, departing from diagnosis-driven and symptom-specific approaches. Personalizing tinnitus interventions requires an exploration and analysis of tinnitus sufferers' experiences to identify common themes. Qualitative research designs facilitate

an in-depth exploration of the subjective experience of living with tinnitus.

Conclusion: Examining the subjective interpretation of tinnitus sounds aids in understanding how patients attribute meaning to their condition, thereby enhancing our understanding of tinnitus-related distress on an individual level.

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