

Chapter 40

Feelings and Emotions

When I was first sidelined by hearing loss and tinnitus, I had no idea that a wild emotional roller coaster was awaiting me. Too much happened all at once—too much loss, too much change, and too many questions without satisfactory answers. Along with the trepidations that came with all the medical investigations, I felt buried under an avalanche of feelings, none of them good or helpful. In the end, the clinical mysteries turned out to be the more manageable part of the whole experience.

Whether it strikes suddenly or progresses stealthily and slowly, the emotional consequences of hearing loss and accompanying challenges can be overwhelming. Life is no longer the same, and lifestyle changes and adaptations are in order. Mostly, though, along with fading hearing come serious communication difficulties that tempt people to curtail their interactions with others—and that can be a set-up for social isolation, lonesomeness, and ultimately, depression.

Dealing with the consequences of my sudden losses proved to be a tall order. Even after all this time, the echoes of “that day’s” events continuously remind me of the changes that forced themselves upon me, literally overnight. Gone was my effortless hearing; I now strain to listen and to understand. I squint as I try to concentrate and pay attention. I misunderstand. I do not understand. As background din drowns out voices or blends with them, it doesn’t take long before I feel as if I have swirls of Bundt cake dough in my head. No matter how interesting the conversation topic is, the back-and-forth word fights of people interrupting one another and yelling in order to make a point simply wear me down. I become quiet or tune out, which is so

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

not like me. This is when I am usually told that I am not my “*old self*.”

I always loved my work and took great pride in my profession. Keeping my job became the ultimate challenge that I desperately wanted to meet. I managed to do so with difficulty for a while, but eventually my efforts ground to a halt, and I had to let go. The job was gone. Also gone was my perfect sense of balance. I now watch every step that I take. Being wobbly certainly does not pep up my self-confidence. Gone is the time when I could sit quietly and read or just enjoy a solitary moment. Tinnitus, my unrelenting ear phantom, makes sure of that.

Yes, it became easy to keep track of my losses while taking my blessings for granted. In order to heal and to find the “new me,” that would have to change.

Meanwhile, I was totally overwhelmed. Even before I emerged from the fog of processing the events and from the initial medical frenzy, I realized that the road ahead was no longer straight or predictable. It abruptly wandered off into unfamiliar territory. Off-kilter with a head abuzz with tinnitus, how would I even begin to manage my new life? Would I always be this desperate and angry?

Eventually, I got this feeling of an emotional *déjà vu*. I remembered that way back in pharmacy college, we had studied something called the “grief cycle.” Much of it could be applied to my present situation, and I actually derived quite a bit of relief from this. I was not simply a self-absorbed whiner feeling sorry for myself. On the contrary, I was slugging my way through a natural but bumpy process, side-tracked by self-doubt, fear and a generous dose of mental anguish.

The Contorted Path to Healing

In the 1960s, a Swiss doctor, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, wrote so eloquently in her book *On Death and Dying* about the ultimate human test—death. She talks about the emotional cycles that terminally ill people pass through before they finally arrive at accepting their

destiny and finding peace. The same emotional swings also apply to loss in general, whether we lose a friendship, our job, our lifestyle, our personal freedom—or our hearing.

Changes brought on by events that we see as massively negative set us up for sorrow and grief. We mourn the loss and progress through a cycle of emotions that will eventually reconcile us with the new realities and allow us to move on with our lives. Many people make the journey toward acceptance automatically and go forward, while others need professional assistance in order to overcome the obstacles that litter the way. Cycle of grief expressions, such as shock, denial, anger, depression, testing, and acceptance suddenly rang quite true with me.

Working through the issues has not been a nicely delineated process. Moving from shock to acceptance is not a neatly laid-out recipe, and it became a rough ride. I tended to bounce around a bit jostled by a whirlwind of conflicting feelings. Up and down I went. I must admit that I spent the first day after my ear event feeling numb and in a state of controlled shock. In the years that I had spent in health care, I had witnessed plenty of times when traumatic incidents struck people with disbelief so profound that it took them to the edge of emotional shut-down.

Although I was plenty distraught, I never denied the medical facts of my condition. I was in denial, however, about how my life would be affected by the limits that had been bestowed on me. I did not know what to do, and so I pretended that not that much had happened. Life goes on, right? At the cost of mental and physical exhaustion, I returned to teaching and to working at the pharmacy. I gave the impression that things were just fine. People even commented on how well I coped with the situation, which made me feel guilty. Yet I did not want to dispel the myth of my “impressive” recovery—another variation on the theme of denial. At first, I thought that keeping some normalcy in my life would be helpful. However, the notion of “normalcy” had

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

taken on a totally new meaning.

While appearing rather serene on the outside, on the inside a massive storm was gathering strength. By and by, I became angry at fate and frustrated with myself and with the often spiritless yet hugely expensive health system that seemed to have abandoned me. I was tremendously grateful for the medical treatment that I had received, but it came up short on satisfactory answers. In order to get resolution, I needed explanations and context. My off-the-charts frustration abated somewhat when I realized that it was up to me to enlighten myself on the clinical details of my condition and on available resources.

Initial research efforts were cut short by my slow slide into a period of guilt-fueled depression. I felt guilty for being unable to cope better and faster, for wrecking everybody else's life, for not contributing financially the way I used to, especially as a stack of medical bills reminded me of my greatly reduced work schedule. I felt guilty for being so self-absorbed when my issues paled in comparison to those of so many others. I kept wondering where I had gone wrong and what I could have done differently. Instead of moving forward, such self-analysis threw me back into the past. I became an emotional wet noodle, overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness.

Finding a New Reference Point

For quite a while I was stalled on the road to healing, looking back. The biggest problem was that the "old life" kept on being my reference point. Mired in the past, I threatened to become my own biggest stumbling block as I strained to move forward. No wonder that progress was slow. I forgot about an old warfare motto that advises never to surrender territory that already has been paid for in blood. The "blood" in this case was made of frustration, physical and emotional trauma, self-doubt, self-blame, and an ample amount of tears. Rather than contemplating what used to be, it was time to focus on what was to come, the new life. I had to find the "positives" and weave them into