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HUH?

It's really hard for me to find much to complain about these days. Love my new job. Spring has arrived after another brutal Cleveland winter. Tiger is (mostly) out of the tabloids and back on the golf course. Life is pretty good.

Yet, I can always find something to whine about. In this case, it's the whining in my head.

I am one of millions of Americans who have this lovely condition called tinnitus. It's basically persistent ringing in the ears. It's hardly a major medical problem. But, it's a slightly maddening annoyance that's permanent and untreatable.

My doctor – who happens to be the top hearing guy at the Cleveland Clinic – says that tinnitus is usually a symptom of damage to the tiny nerves in your ears that normally sense high-frequency sound. It expresses itself in a variety of ways. For some, it comes and goes. For others, it's 24/7. Sometimes it sounds like a “whooshing” noise or bells ringing or a siren blaring.

For me, it sounds a little like that continuous tone you used to get on your old TV when a channel was off the air. *Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!* Only I can't turn the channel. It literally never stops. And, to top that off, it's increasingly difficult to hear people in crowded rooms. I spent the entire GIS show cupping my ear and saying, “Huh?” I felt like Gabby Hayes or some other old fart in a black-and-white Western, constantly saying “Speak up, sonny, I'm a might deaf.”

Apparently, I have either my grandfather or Pete Townshend to blame for this malady. The most common cause of tinnitus is long-term exposure to machinery, guns or explosives or really loud music. It can also be associated with hereditary hearing loss. The doc quizzed me extensively about all that stuff and, since I'm too much of a wuss to have been in the military and I'm

too lazy to operate heavy equipment, he figured it might either run in my family (Granddad was deaf as a stump) or that I'd murdered my eardrums at just one seriously loud concert.

I protested that I really had never been much for head-banging heavy metal or the like ... but then I remembered going to a Who concert around 1990. I sat pretty close to the stage – and a massive wall of amplifiers – as Townshend, Daltry and company lived up to their reputation for being the loudest rock band in the world. I vaguely remember that I was partially deaf in my left ear for about a month afterwards. Oops.

Ironically, Townshend had announced right before that 1990 show that he had developed tinnitus and

1. Always wear good ear protection when mowing, running heavy equipment, operating hand-helds or grinding;

2. See tip No. 1.

The fact is hearing damage might be the top on-the-job health hazards for superintendents and golf course workers. I've met plenty of guys with back injuries, interesting scars from exhaust pipe burns, persistent poison ivy and various crushed digits from lifts that didn't quite work properly. Jeez, nearly every good mechanic I know is missing at least part of a finger. Having half a pinky is the rough equivalent of a master's degree in the school of reel sharpening.

But, if you total up all of those injuries, I'll bet it wouldn't come close

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wouldn't be able to play as loud any more. Lying lymie bastard.

You can Google tinnitus and find a zillion miracle cures ranging from herbal crap like ginko biloba to hypnosis and white noise generators. When I mentioned this to my doctor and asked him what I should try, he just smiled the wise and weary smile of someone who'd been asked the same question thousands of time and said, “Try getting used to it.”

So, I'm getting used to it. But that doesn't mean that I'm happy about it. And, I sure as hell don't want you to have the same problem.

I asked my world-class physician for a list of tips that I could pass along to help safeguard you and your employees on the job. Here's his highly scientific advice:

to the number of folks wearing hearing aids or who – like me – strain to hear what their buddy is saying in a crowded bar.

I wonder how many young guys are sitting there reading this right now thinking, “It can't happen to me...I'm not gonna be some old, deaf dude.” *Au contraire, mon frère*. It can happen and it very likely will unless you follow the sage advice my doctor passed along. The short version is, no matter how young you are, don't mess with loud.

By the way, after I'd received my auditory death sentence from my doc, I asked him if he ever treated people from the landscaping or golf business for the same problem. He flashed that same sleepy half smile and said, “All the time.”

At least I think that's what he said. GCI