

Loud Noises Are Slowly Ruining Your Health

David Hillier, posted at Vice UK | Oct 25, 2016

Noise pollution is a lot worse for you than you may have thought. According to the World Health Organization, it's the second biggest environmental cause of health problems in humans after air pollution. Studies from 2012 suggested it contributed to 910,000 additional cases of hypertension across Europe every year and 10,000 premature deaths related to coronary heart diseases or strokes. Closer to home, a [15-year study](#) found that there was a higher rate of cardiovascular and stroke-related deaths among those living near to the rabble of Heathrow—something residents are sure to cite in the wake of [ministers approving](#) a third runway there.

So why isn't anyone talking about it?

"Noise is invisible," says Poppy Szkiler of [Quiet Mark](#). "I think that's why the problems associated with it have been ignored, until now."

Quiet Mark provide a universal stamp of approval for products and companies that recognize the importance of reducing their acoustic footprint. They were born out of the Noise Abatement Society, established in 1959 when John Connell—Szkiler's grandfather—wrote an angry letter to The Daily Telegraph bemoaning the increasingly invasive levels of noise in the world around him.



He was flabbergasted by the response—"Sackfuls of letters in agreement," says Poppy—and lobbied Parliament so hard for change that the Noise Abatement Act was passed in 1960. Ever since, The Noise Abatement Society and Quiet Mark have flown the flag for a quieter society. Last week saw the release of their crowdfunded film, [In Pursuit of Silence](#), which examines the way excessive noise has slowly infiltrated every aspect of our lives, and why human lives depend on our ability to combat it.

"Noise abatement is a bit like smoking," says Szkiler. "It's a public health issue. One day people just realized you shouldn't smoke inside buildings. I think we've coped with noise for such a long time, but people are starting to recognize the value of a quieter life." As proof, she points to a partnership with John Lewis, which got involved with Quiet Mark after customer research suggested 65 percent of its customers craved more peace and quiet.

So how exactly does noise harm our bodies? Like most things, it's an issue of both body and mind. The Lancet's "[Auditory and non-auditory effects of noise on health](#)" paper from 2013 states that "noise exposure increases systolic and diastolic blood pressure, changes heart rate, and causes the release of stress hormones." So that pneumatic drill jackhammering outside your office window all last week? It's crunching up your blood pressure as well as the pavement.

Similarly, if you're living next to a busy city road, you're likely to be dealing with a decibel level somewhere in the 60s, while a main arterial road could be in the 70s. The same Lancet report

claimed that long-term exposure to an average noise level of just 55Db is "thought to be risky for health."

Noise's second way of getting to you is a little more prosaic: it's just really fucking annoying. It can disturb, frustrate, anger, and irritate. It might sound overblown to get into a tizz about your neighbor's insistence on blasting Slammin' Vinyl mix-tapes at full volume every Sunday morning, but that same Lancet paper estimated that 640,000 DALYs (disability-adjusted life years) are lost each year in Europe through "noise annoyance." A disability-adjusted life year refers to a human year lost to ill health, disability, or premature death, so it's clear this is no trivial matter.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of those most affected by noise annoyance are people living close to airports. "Aircraft noise seems to upset most people," says Charlotte Clark, professor of Environmental & Mental Health Epidemiology at Queen Mary University. "There's a theory with road noise that you might adapt to it better as it's continuous. With aircraft, the noise builds then booms very loudly, getting to a peak of 100 to 120Dbs at its highest."

To put that into context: 140Dbs is generally considered the threshold for pain.

"People feel they can't control the aircraft," says Clark, "and it's a stressor. There's some research that suggests you might have more negative responses to noise if you've got poor mental health."

Every expert I speak to regarding this feature alludes to potential anxiety-creating effects of unwanted noise, and though there's little suggestion that noise in itself will lead you into depression or an anxiety-based disorder, as part of the ephemera of life in 2016—you can count the incessant dings and dongs of your smartphone as part of this—it doesn't help if you're already predisposed to mental illness.

The final—and, by turns, most obvious and most concerning aspect in all this—is noise's effect on your slumber, with the Lancet estimating 903,000 Dalys for "sleep disturbance." On a more straightforward level, this could be noise that wakes you up or keeps you up at night, leading you to feel tired and stressed the next day (and for a person suffering from anxiety issues, this could of course exacerbate the situation). But the most chilling is that even when you're asleep, when the sheep have stopped dancing across your eyes and you've finally resolved to stop counting Instagram likes for seven, sweet, unconscious hours, noise will still be playing keepy-uppy with your heart. "Cardiovascular responses to loud noises happen whether you're conscious or not," says Clark.

Of course, in all this there has to be a degree of pragmatism. Firstly: said cardiovascular stresses should only be considered possibly problematic after long-term noise exposure—as in 20 years living on Kingsland Road. Secondly: cool shit happens in cities. What choice have we got? "In psychology, we talk about Psychological Restoration," says Clark. "This means going somewhere green, somewhere quiet, and having time to relax and restore yourself from the stresses."

One of the most enlightening parts of *In Pursuit of Silence* is a segment on Dr. Yoshifumi Miyazaki, who is the father of "forest therapy" in Japan. This involves taking "patients" into forests as a kind of preventative medicine against future physical and mental strife. He even claims to have recorded increased anti-cancer cell activity of 56 percent among people relaxing in the ferns.

Regardless of whether or not that stat is tinged a little with hyperbole, there's a clear message: you might not be able to stop the traffic, but you can go to the park. And turn off your phone on the way there.

**Copied 10/26/2016 from: http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/is-excessive-noise-messing-with-your-health
(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added, but only to add analysis & clarification)**