

Haven't You Heard?

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Noise is everywhere. We cannot escape the chattering crowds, the busy streets, and other sounds emitted by everyday objects. Most of the time, these sounds drift into our ears unnoticed; but, what if we decided to keep track of all the noises presented to our ears throughout the day? Most likely, we would find an appalling average decibel level from the noises reaching our ears. But how does this affect us? With excessive exposure to noise, measured even as few as eighty decibels, our ears can suffer extreme damage (Foss 185). But how can we escape this noise? Actually, we cannot, unless we spend the rest of our lives locked inside a soundproof room. However, a convenient alternative lies in the decreased use of the ear-devouring monsters we call personal stereos.

Sensory hearing loss, or hearing loss due to intense noise exposure over an extended period, is the encumbering inhabitant of the ears of one million people (Fallon). As noted in *Pathophysiology*, this type of hearing damage is the result of the destruction of tiny hairs that line the organ of Corti found within the cochlea (450). With exposure to intense noise levels, or "acoustic trauma," these hairs become worn down, thus inhibiting proper functioning of the ear (*Merck Manual* 998; Fallon). This produces a "muffled" interpretation of sound (Fallon). By decreasing the use of our iPods, walkmans, and other such devices, we can prevent irrevocable damage to our ears.

Foreseeing the disapproving looks many personal stereo consumers may wear upon being told to stop using their three hundred dollar iPods, I do not propose society completely desist in

its use of such devices. However, simply warning the consumer of the damaging effects of the product in the owner's manual seems to produce little to no effect at all. In fact, the technological geniuses our society's youth have become hardly even glance at the manual. Warnings, in order to be noticed by the young listener, should be placed directly on the product, as well as in the manual. To effectively spread this warning, producers must assume the buyer has no prior anticipation of sensory hearing loss and therefore must provide this warning through all possible means. For instance, the consumer has a right to be aware that, in a study performed by Warwick Williams, hearing loss was reported after an average of 81.7 decibels of personal stereo exposure for a period of between forty minutes to thirteen hours per day (232-233). The consumer also should be warned of the risk of tinnitus, an indication of sensory hearing loss that produces a "ringing" sound in the ear (Foss 185; McCance and Huether 452). To ensure the consumer is completely aware of the problem, warnings should be placed where they are most likely to be observed: on the product itself.

According to Tara D. Foss, editor of the *British Journal of Nursing*, iPod earbuds currently are unable to produce sound above 104 decibels. At this rate, no more than fifteen minutes should be devoted to iPod usage (Foss 185). While this inability does prevent intense noise exposure above 104 decibels, it does not ensure the listener will take extra precaution to decrease the use of the iPod at the conclusion of fifteen minutes. A possible solution is the creation of a "beeping" sound in headphones, which could alert the listener after a number of minutes and correspond to the decibel level being emitted by the device. For example, if headphones contained this type of auditory warning after approximately fifteen minutes, the listener would become aware of the pending danger caused by further listening. This invention ideally would be made legally mandatory for all personal stereo and headphone production

companies, lest consumer apathy occur. With constant reiteration of the dangers associated with personal stereos, consumers might be more attentive to the value of their hearing abilities and perhaps not remain so incessantly attached to their headphones.

However, before we can overcome this obstacle, society first must be informed of the risks involved with using personal stereo devices, since we cannot venture to seek answers if we do not know the question. Therefore, the media should have more to say about the dangers of personal stereo use. Through government warnings via television and radio, this goal can be achieved. For instance, we have a right to know that, as noted in the Encyclopedia of Nursing and Allied Health, once sensory hearing damage occurs, there is no harmful matter or dysfunctional organ which can be removed, as in other types of hearing damage (Fallon). Further, sensory hearing loss can only be treated with encumbering hearing aids and surgically implanted devices (Fallon).

Although there are several methods for addressing the problem of personal stereo usage, the diffusion of awareness to society is the most promising, since our decisions alone hold the power to prevent many of the evils of our world. For example, if, so many years ago, the victims of the black plague had known the cause of the deadly illness, they may have been warier of the rodents that poisoned their existence. Or, if tomorrow we discovered the leading cause of cancer was attributable to the use of cellular phones, would we not hesitate to use them? In this case, though placing warnings directly on the device might awaken a scrupulous voice in the back of our minds warning us to protect our ears, perhaps it is not enough to truly penetrate the boundaries of our judgment. Consumers also might be averse to an auditory warning and become unresponsive to the problem. Therefore, we first must point out the gravity of the problem before another step can be taken to solve it. Once we are fully aware of the facts, we then can make the

decision to listen to that little voice and protect something as precious as our ability to hear.

We might not be able to shield our ears from every uncomfortable sound that meets them; however, we should not be idle in our efforts to protect our hearing, for it is a valuable gift which cannot be recovered if lost to these leeching personal stereos which feed on our ability to hear. Decreasing their use can guard our hearing from such damage. By raising awareness through television and radio warnings, society would have a better understanding of the problem, and, therefore, it would be more likely to consider the dangers of employing these devices. Once we identify the problem, we must listen to the warnings before it is too late to hear them.

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