



HONK

HONK

BOOM BOOM  
BOOM

BOOM

GRRR  
GRRRR

WOOF

WOOF

WOOF

VROOM  
VROOM


TAC TAC  
TAC TAC

TAC TAC


PLUCK  
BLOCHT  
WUW



# SILENCE



The world is getting louder these days. (*Can you hear me now?*) And all that racket can have serious consequences for your health. Here's how to muffle the din and find a little peace and quiet for body, mind, and even soul.



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## places where it's still quiet

### obscure museums

Like the Center for the History of American Needlework. (Visit [museumsusa.org](http://museumsusa.org).)

### empty spots in the library

Head to a special-collections room or the higher floors, which tend to be less busy.

### parks that enforce noise-pollution ordinances

Some national parks strictly prohibit loud music and vehicles. (Find them at [nps.gov](http://nps.gov).)

### houses of worship

Many have an open-door policy, but respect is in order. (Leave the trashy novel at home.)

### cemeteries

Consider them "memorial parks" and they'll seem less creepy. And there are plenty of empty benches to rest in peace.

### One Square Inch of Silence

The proprietors of this teeny sanctuary in Washington State's Hoh National Park aim to keep it 100 percent free of noise pollution. Download MP3 samples recorded at the park, including "melting snow" and "mountain steps," at [onesquareinch.org/links](http://onesquareinch.org/links).

**MY HUSBAND'S SNORING** is a health hazard. Or so I learned last year, when I bought a jar of earplugs and found out that I could pay for them with my flexible-spending account. According to medical experts, nighttime quiet is as important to my well-being as wearing eyeglasses or getting my daily vitamins, and even low-level noise prevents deep, restorative rest. Noise also contributes to high blood pressure, strokes, circulatory problems, and distracted thinking. Plus, anecdotally at least, it makes us cranky.

Lately we seem to be on the run from unwanted sound. There are more than 500 kinds of noise-canceling headphones on Amazon.com, and the iPhone White Noise Lite app has been downloaded more than 10 million times. Writer George Prochnik's *In Pursuit of Silence* (Anchor, \$16), published last year, is a 352-page historical and scientific examination of why society has gotten louder and how we can quiet down again.

"I felt there was less of the silence I had always found necessary and wondered whether I was just getting grouchier," says Prochnik, who lives in New York City. "I started asking people what about city life bothered them most, and noise was always near the top of the list."

The scientific evidence that noise damages our health is stronger than ever, adds Prochnik. "I think we're seeing noise tied into a host of other problems of the age—problems of attention, aggression, insomnia, and general stress," he says. "Noise is now our default position as a society. But I believe we have to make an effort to build a passionate case for silence."

### THE SOUND AND THE FURY

Out of approximately 111.8 million households accounted for in the U.S. Census Bureau's 2009 American Housing Survey, about 25.4 million reported being bothered by street noise or heavy traffic. The World Health Organization recently published a study of the relationship in Western Europe between environmental noise and health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment, sleep disturbance, tinnitus (chronic ringing of the ears), and plain old annoyance. According to the findings, about 1,629 heart attacks that occur in Germany each year are caused by traffic noise.

Even hospitals, the places we go to heal, have gotten louder. A 2004 Johns Hopkins University study found that average daytime hospital noise rose from 57 decibels in 1960 to 72 decibels in 2004. Blame the cacophony of PA announcements, beepers, heating and cooling systems, people talking to one another, and people talking into equipment activated by voice recognition.

And of course any discussion of the upsurge in public noise has to include the cell phone, which has made it possible for all of us to converse endlessly, anytime, anywhere. "We spew noise pollution into our phones, and all that noise only makes us noisier," says Bart Kosko, a professor of electrical engineering at the University of Southern California, in Los Angeles, who has written a book on the scourge of sound, entitled *Noise* (Viking, \$19). It's worth noting that we may be deaf to our personal contributions: In a 2006 Pew Research Center poll, 82 percent of respondents said they had encountered annoying cell-phone chatter in public, but only 8 percent said they had noticed their own phone habits irritating others.

Things aren't much better underwater. Acoustic scientists at the Pennsylvania State University Applied Research Laboratory, in University Park, have found that North American right whales are calling to one another more loudly. Most likely that is a result of the commotion produced by commercial shipping.

### ALARMING DEVELOPMENTS

All this hubbub is bad news for the human brain and nervous system, which, evolutionarily speaking, aren't used to noise. "Over millions of years, we evolved in quiet environments," says Kosko. "If you heard a loud noise, it was probably something like an animal roar and meant danger was near." An encounter with a tiger, say, would set off a cascade of stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, to help mobilize our bodies to fight a threat or flee from it. The same thing happens today when we hear a car alarm.

"When you're disturbed by noise, your body reacts as it does to any stressor—your heart beats faster, your blood pressure increases," says New York City environmental psychologist Arline L. Bronzaft, who has been studying noise for more than 30 years. "Being surrounded by noise can

affect you even when you don't realize it." To wit: In a 2000 study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, clerical workers were divided into two groups: One was placed in a quiet room, the other in a space as noisy as a typical open office. The noisy-office workers had elevated levels of the stress hormone epinephrine and were significantly less motivated to try to complete challenging cognitive tasks. Yet few of them reported feeling especially stressed.

"When you're faced with a threat—and that's how your body and mind perceive noise—you automatically prioritize other functions for survival's sake," says Paul Salmon, an associate professor of clinical psychology and a codirector of the Biobehavioral Laboratory at the University of Louisville, in Kentucky. The primitive, reflexive circuits of the brain take over, while the regions involved in higher cognitive functions, such as planning and decision making, become less active. So, yes, when the kids are screaming, you actually might not be able to hear yourself think.

#### THE SILENT TREATMENT

Before you run screaming, listen to this: We can fight the assault of noise without crawling into an isolation tank. The latest research indicates that short periods of quiet can help us put ourselves back together again.

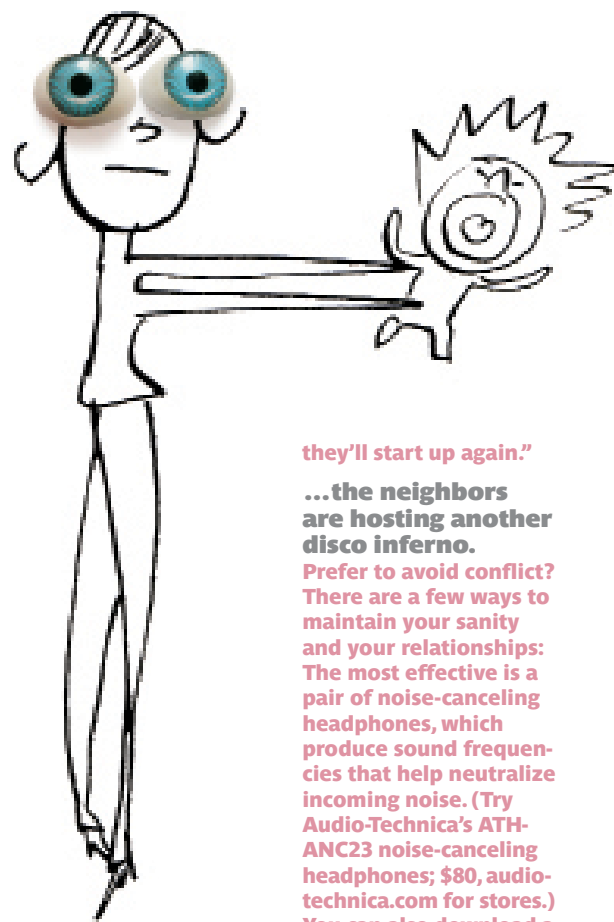
Most of the scientific studies on the benefits of silence focus on meditation, the practice of just

## increase the peace!

What to do if...

...the dog is barking incessantly.

Keep him occupied, says veterinarian **Nicholas Dodman**, director of the **Animal Behavior Clinic at the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, in North Grafton, Massachusetts**. Try a chew toy scented with vanilla (it will seem novel). Or turn some food into a puzzle with a Kong (\$7 to \$28, depending on size, at pet-supply stores), a hollow rubber toy that you fill with kibble; the dog has to bop it around to get the treats. You can also try training him with a Gentle Leader head collar (visit [gentleleader.com](http://gentleleader.com) for stores): Put it on when he's barking, then gently pull the attached leash—which causes the halter to (painlessly) activate calming pressure points—and say, "Quiet." Eventually the command should work without the halter. To find a trainer, visit the Association of Pet Dog Trainers website ([apdt.com](http://apdt.com)).



they'll start up again."

...the neighbors are hosting another disco inferno.

Prefer to avoid conflict? There are a few ways to maintain your sanity and your relationships: The most effective is a pair of noise-canceling headphones, which produce sound frequencies that help neutralize incoming noise. (Try Audio-Technica's ATH-ANC23 noise-canceling headphones; \$80, [audio-technica.com](http://audio-technica.com) for stores.) You can also download a white-noise app for your iPhone (\$1, [itunes.com](http://itunes.com)) or Android (\$1, [market.android.com](http://market.android.com)). Chris Bennett, the proprietor of Daily Decibel, a website that advocates for peace and quiet, suggests this lower-tech option: heavy-duty foam earplugs, such as Hearos Xtreme Protection (\$5 for seven pairs, [walgreens.com](http://walgreens.com)). They have a 33 noise-reduction rating based on Environmental Protection Agency guidelines. (That means they reduce noise by 33 decibels.)

...your kids won't stop hollering.

Don't yell at them to stop yelling, says Chung Wallace, a preschool teacher in Passaic, New Jersey: "Children won't follow rules that you yourself are breaking." Instead, whisper (they'll have to simmer down to hear you), or use your "inside voice." Nancy S. Buck, Ph.D., a psychologist and the author of *Peaceful Parenting* ([peacefulparenting.com](http://peacefulparenting.com), \$16), likes the Loud Game: Go outside with the kids and tell them to get rid of the "screamies" by whooping at the top of their lungs. If they get loud again, ask if there are any more screamies they need to release. Another strategy is distraction, says Wallace: Introduce the kids to a new project, like origami. But don't leave the supplies out all the time, she warns: "Then it won't seem special. Their attention will stray, and



## **a little bit louder now**

**1920 vs. 2004**

**A proud Nebraska inventor designs the first automobile alarm. Eighty-four years later, New Yorkers propose a bill to ban car alarms as a public nuisance.**

**1968 vs. 2006**

**The cubicle is born, and the private office conversation dies. Now cubicles account for about \$3 billion of office-furniture sales (the largest share of the market) per year.**

**1975 vs. 2008**

**Air traffic increases significantly: The number of miles flown by passengers on domestic airlines in the United States goes up by 329 percent—from about 136 billion miles to more than 583 billion miles.**

**1975 vs. 2010**

**The average number of TV sets per household in the United States rises by 87 percent—from 1.57 per household to 2.93.**

**1985 vs. 2008**

**The number of miles passengers ride per year in cars, trucks, and buses in the United States increases by about 60 percent—from 3,012,953,000,000 to 4,871,683,000,000.**

**1995 vs. 2010**

**Thirteen percent of Americans (33,800,000) have cell phones in 1995. By the end of 2010, 96 percent (302,900,000) are yelling, "I'm losing you!"**

sitting quietly and focusing on breathing. According to recent findings, brief periods of meditation can lower blood pressure and reduce pain. Meditation can even enhance cognitive performance; in one study, middle-schoolers who meditated were shown to have higher test scores. Studies from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and other medical schools have revealed that meditation can increase activity in the left side of the frontal region of the brain, the area associated with a more positive emotional state.

"Silence and meditation aren't exactly the same thing," says New York City meditation teacher Harshada Wagner. "In meditation, you start with silence—or at least quiet, since total silence is almost impossible. Then, within that quiet, you turn attention to a deeper part of yourself. It's really a silence from demands." Wagner believes that the biggest misconception about meditation is that when we do it, we have to cease all thought, a virtually impossible proposition. "The mind is like an ocean," he says. "You're never going to still it. But the goal here is just to give yourself a break."

To make meditation "a little deal, not a big deal," says Wagner, start with a five-minute session. Sit in a comfortable spot (yes, it can be the couch), close your eyes, and focus on your breathing, which should be "natural and easy but deep." Starting at your toes, relax your entire body, working up to the top of your head with the in breath, then traveling back down again with the out breath in one continuous motion, like an undulating wave. With every wave, feel your body letting go of tension. "Don't worry about your mind—it may keep thinking," says Wagner. "Try to let go of your to-do list. If you fall asleep, it's fine. There's no wrong way to meditate."

### **SILENT PARTNERS**

Silence can mean more than just shutting out the world. "It can also connect us to one another," says Katherine Schultz, the dean of education at Mills College, in Oakland, and the author of two books about silence as a classroom teaching tool. The subject first fascinated her as a teacher and a principal in Quaker schools. For the Quaker faith, silence is a cornerstone. In a worship service, participants sit quietly and speak only when they're

moved to. "I learned that out of silence, both children and adults often spoke and thought more clearly and creatively," says Schultz. She is on the board of a Quaker camp and says that when discussions get intense, one member may prompt the others to stop and sit in silence. "There's often an incredible shift in the conversation as a result," she says, "because we start reflecting, not just reacting."

Sometimes, ironically enough, we have to be quiet to communicate with each other, says Schultz. "Teachers are taught to count to 10 after they ask a question because it's uncomfortable to sit in silence—you immediately start to think that no one is going to answer. But that wait time is what gives more students space to participate."

### **THE POINT IS MUTE**

When writer Anne LeClaire decided to spend at least a day each month without talking, she realized "so much of what I would have said wasn't particularly necessary anyway." The author of *Listening Below the Noise* (Harper Perennial, \$14), LeClaire started the silent days 19 years ago as part of a "quiet little project" during a hard time when the mother of a close friend was dying. "There's a correlation between silence and slowing down," she says. "The assault of noise and busyness creates this false urgency. Now I'm calmer but also more energetic—a feeling that carries over into the nonsilent days."

There are ways that the rest of us can weave quiet into our lives, says LeClaire: We can turn off the car radio, take a walk without music, cook or do some other chore in silence, or retreat to the bathroom (where one's family is less likely to invade) for a silent soak. We can take a half-day sabbatical from technology. "Or once a week, find a quiet place where you can sit and listen to nothing," she says. "Five minutes is good. Thirty minutes is even better."

LeClaire likes to think of silence not as emptiness but as space. "Imagine a page of words. If we took away the margins and the space between the paragraphs, we would have just a page of black," she says. "It wouldn't be prose anymore. Without silence our lives don't make any more sense than that page." ■





BLOCH