

## CLASS OUTLINE FOR TRAIN THE BRAIN: A MINDFULNESS FOR TINNITUS CLASS

### Week 1: Introduction to Mindfulness

The first class is an introduction to mindfulness in general and to how mindfulness works with tinnitus. We note:

- Mindfulness training increases our ability to focus on non-tinnitus related elements of the present
- Through mindfulness, we train the body to respond in a nonreactive/nonjudgmental way to external triggers in general and to the trigger of tinnitus in particular. This nonreactive/nonjudgmental attitude towards our tinnitus is the key to habituation
- Mindfulness training (including meditation) increases our ability to successfully deal with stress, which invariably has a positive impact on our tinnitus

After some introductory material in terms of class procedure and protocol, as well as class introductions, we will engage in formal and informal mindfulness practices. The formal practice for this week is the body scan, while the informal practice involves a mindful eating exercise. When it comes to tinnitus, the body scan is first an excellent relaxation technique, although this is not its main function. One of the main skills we need to develop is the ability to calm the body, to bring it out of the agitated fight or flight stage that the tinnitus puts it in. In addition, the body scan begins to put us into touch with our body—another essential skill in working with tinnitus. The informal practice exercises increase our ability to hold our attention in the present moment rather than have it wander away. By bringing mindfulness to our daily activities, we can gain control over our focus and increase our ability to place our attention where we want it rather than on our tinnitus.

### **ASSIGNMENT: Daily Body Scan; noticing routine activities handout**

### Week 2: Applied Mindfulness: Polyvagal Theory

Week 2 introduces polyvagal theory—an awkwardly named theory of extreme relevance to working with our tinnitus. According to polyvagal theory (named after the vagus nerve, the tenth cranial nerve and the longest nerve in the body), our nervous system is in one of three states: a sympathetic state of fight/flight, a dorsal shut down state, or a ventral state of connection. From this fact, it adds two claims. First, state follows state. The state that our nervous system is in determines how we view the world, including how we think about our tinnitus. Our tinnitus feels different when we are in a grounded, secure state than when we are in fight or flight. Second, the state of the nervous system is not an unmovable event but can be influenced by our conscious actions. Importantly, the point is not to remain in the connected state of ventral vagal as much as possible and avoid the other two. This would not only be impossible but inadvisable, since there are times we require the sympathetic energy in order to rouse ourselves and times when the suppressing nature of the dorsal can be of use. Rather, the goal is to develop an elasticity, an ability to move between the states. This requires first that we

identify where in our nervous system we currently are, which is why mindfulness is a useful adjunct to polyvagal work. Once we are able to recognize the state of our nervous system, we want to develop strategies to extricate ourselves from the sympathetic or dorsal states as well to increase our ability to linger in the ventral state.

This week we begin to acquaint ourselves with this intervention by creating a personal profile map of our own nervous system. In the course of this class, we will dig deeper down into each of the three states, examining both what triggers these states as well as how to extricate ourselves from the more destructive ones and increase our connection to the healthiest of these. The formal practice of sitting meditation is introduced and engaged and we spend some time dissecting the components of meditation. We will watch JKZ's video on non-striving and discuss the role of this attitude in the practice.

**ASSIGNMENT: Alternate sitting meditation and body scan (15-20 minutes), Complete personal profile map; continue to engage in informal mindfulness practices**

### Week 3: The Sympathetic Nervous System

In week 3 we introduce our third formal practice, moving meditation. While there are numerous practices we could engage in, we will focus primarily on qi gong, which allows us to integrate breath and body movement. We continue to work with our sitting practice, adding the practice of “naming” a thought to that of simply “noticing” a thought. For most of this class, we will focus in on the stress response, which is the mechanism responsible for the state of fight/flight. We will examine the evolutionary purpose of this state of the autonomic nervous system as well as its functioning in modern society. The state of fight/flight is connected to tinnitus in several ways. First, the sound of our tinnitus invariably puts the body into the state of fight/flight. Second, stress is invariably linked to a worsening of our tinnitus, so to the degree that we can get stress under control, we can minimize the impact of our tinnitus. This project, that of getting the stress response under control, is central to the class. Hence, we will start to work with one of the most effective ways to control the stress response: breath. We will be doing a lot of breathwork in this course, as it is one of the best ways to work with our nervous system (and hence with our tinnitus).

**ASSIGNMENT: Alternate qi gong practice with body scan or sitting meditation for twenty minutes a day; continue to engage in informal mindfulness practice; complete unpleasant events worksheet**

### Week 4: The Dorsal Vagal Shutdown and what to do about it

We continue our investigation of the role of our thoughts in meditation by watching JKZ “Thoughts as Bubbles” and reading Tara Brach's brief essay “Magic Quarter Second.” After exploring more ways of working with the sympathetic nervous system in addition to breath, we then turn our attention to the Dorsal vagal part of the spectrum. The dorsal shutdown state often follows automatically upon the failure of the fight/flight state to escape from threat, and the feelings of hopelessness and despair that follow are all too familiar to those of us with tinnitus. We will introduce mindful activities that can help us work with this state, focusing in particular on mindful self-compassion. The practice of radical self-acceptance is introduced and we will

watch Tara Brach explore the RAIN meditation. The method of repeating phrases is introduced as well as more breathing practices to work with our tinnitus, especially in times of spike

**ASSIGNMENT: Choose your practice for twenty minutes a day; complete the regulating resources map for sympathetic and dorsal; continue informal practice.**

#### Week 5: Ventral Vagal and Positive Psychology

Working with ventral vagal energy is key in tinnitus. As Polyvagal theory informs us, “story follows state.” The story we are telling about our lives and about our tinnitus are dependent upon the state of our nervous system. We tell ourselves one story about our tinnitus when we are in full blown fight or flight or in dorsal shutdown and another when we are in a connected and safe place. For increasing the amount of time spent in ventral vagal, Positive Psychology is key. Positive Psychology is specifically concerned with the development of evidence-based interventions that can increase our mental health and overall well-being. At this point, we know the practices that can improve mental health with the same degree of accuracy as we know the practices that increase physical health. As in both cases, it is a matter of putting the theory into practice. For the rest of this class, you will be engaged in weekly positive psychology exercises to increase your capacity to engage with the connected state of your being as a way of improving the quality of your life as well as working with your tinnitus. There is evidence that states such as optimism that have been demonstrated to be improved by PP exercises are associated with a decreased tinnitus distress. We will add an additional practice to our meditation, the loving kindness meditation, which itself has been the focus of research and has been shown to be an incredibly beneficial practice

**ASSIGNMENT: At least twenty minutes formal practice of your choosing, utilizing two of the practices; Positive Psychology Assignment, and continued informal practice.**

#### Week 6: CBT

CBT has the longest history as an intervention for tinnitus, but it is neither a panacea nor a silver bullet. As I see it, mental health strategies for tinnitus are like a five-course meal at a fine French restaurant. Using only CBT is like eating just one of the five courses—not even the main one (in my opinion, that title would go to mindfulness). There are numerous mental health interventions that should be a part of one’s tinnitus toolkit, each contributing something different. The sum total of these interventions can be a powerful ally in your tinnitus journey. I will introduce the theory behind CBT and explain how it works both as a general therapeutic intervention and how it works with tinnitus in particular. We will engage in several exercises from what in my estimation is the best CBT workbook out there. We will also look at the relationship between mindfulness and CBT.

**ASSIGNMENT: At least twenty minutes formal practice of your choosing, utilizing two of the practices; Positive Psychology Assignment, and continued informal practice.**

## Week 7: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or ACT is one of the few therapeutic interventions besides CBT and mindfulness that has been demonstrated to reduce tinnitus distress. According to ACT, trying to eradicate psychological distress is a futile task. Like Christ said of the poor, psychological distress will always be with us; it is part of the fabric of life. By resisting these negative emotions, we merely make them stronger. What we resist persists. In this section we will explore the ACT ideology in general as well as how to apply the ACT strategy to our tinnitus. Specifically, we will examine the role that values play in the construction of a meaningful life with tinnitus.

**ASSIGNMENT: At least twenty minutes formal practice of your choosing, utilizing two of the practices; Positive Psychology Assignment, and continued informal practice.**

## Week 8: Review

We will review all of the interventions we have engaged in and discuss next steps in working with our tinnitus. We discuss the role of grief in tinnitus. We will also touch on the similarity between chronic pain and tinnitus and how that research might assist us in working with our tinnitus. We will review the meditation practices we have engaged in and discuss how to build and maintain a meditation practice and provide resources for doing so.