

# The high price of living out loud

By Jim Cornelius  
Editor in Chief

In his 20s, Jack McGowan had a dream job.

"I was an FM DJ for Portland's top rock station," he recalled.

He spent four hours each day with headphones on, cranking up the music now considered "classic rock." He interviewed many of the luminaries of the rock-and-roll world and reveled in an era of music whose breadth, depth, and quality may never be repeated.

But he paid a price.

"I think that was the origin of my hearing loss," he said.

He's not alone. Many people of his generation are living with the consequences of a youth spent at high volume in every activity.

"When you're doing that as a young guy, you have *no thought* for what it's going to be like when you're 70," he said.

What it's like is not nearly as cool as rock and roll. Hearing loss can mean increasing social isolation, frustration with yourself and loved ones — and a diminished quality of life.

"The highs completely rolled off in my hearing," McGowan recalled. "Crisp sounds were no longer there; it was like I had socks in my ears."

Conversation got more and more challenging, especially in a crowded restaurant or when the person speaking wasn't looking directly at him.

"I'd have to say to Jan (his wife), 'Would you turn around and talk to me,'" he said.

Finally, friends sat him down and told him he clearly needed to address his hearing

loss. They told him: "We know your quality of life is suffering."

McGowan's scenario is one that Lanie Tandy of All American Hearing in Redmond sees over and over again. Either through complacency, stubbornness or fear of the expense of acting, people choose to live with hearing loss that has an obvious negative effect on their lives.

She sees couples whose relationship has become strained because of constant misunderstandings, or the sense that your partner is not listening to you. One partner will repeat himself over and over and end up shouting.

None of that is beneficial.

"For most types of hearing loss, louder is not better," Tandy notes.

The problem isn't volume; as it was with McGowan, it's about the ability to distinguish sounds.

"It causes a tremendous amount of frustration and conflict," Tandy said.

So often, she has heard a patient say, "It's not that I don't want to hear you."

Hearing aids can provide a life-changing improvement to the deteriorating quality of life associated with hearing loss.

Tandy feels a calling to encourage people to act as early as possible when they notice diminishment in their hearing. Get tested; identify exactly what is going on and seek correction.

"No one is excited to come in for their first set of hearing aids," Tandy acknowledges.

Once they've done so, though, Tandy hears a common refrain: "Almost everyone says, 'I wish I'd known sooner.'"

McGowan admits to some

resistance to getting hearing aids. It's hard to acknowledge diminished capacity. He also recognizes that that outlook is silly.

"Hearing aids are glasses for your ears," he said. "That's all it is. There should be no embarrassment."

Perceived cost is another significant barrier for some people who are convinced that they just can't afford hearing aids.

"I never, ever want cost to be the reason someone doesn't come in and get their hearing addressed," Tandy told *The Nugget*. "We can find a solution."

Hearing aids can range from quality refurbished devices to state-of-the-art "smart" units that have onboard artificial intelligence that can monitor your degree of social interaction.

That social interaction is more and more important as we age and social isolation becomes a bigger and bigger issue. The longer a person has retreated into the isolation imposed by hearing loss, the harder it is to come out.

"Isolation and social disengagement is probably the biggest thing I see my patients struggle with," Tandy said. "They'll get hearing aids, but they won't engage in social activity or expose their ears to new listening environments. It's become such an issue in hearing loss that (monitoring of interaction) has actually been incorporated into the new technology."

"Aural rehab" becomes part of the process of regaining quality of life.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Jack McGowan spinning vinyl in Portland. Decades of rock and roll are hard on the hearing.

"A big part of that is involvement of the family," Tandy said. "Getting someone back into the world of hearing is a family ordeal."

Coming back into that world of hearing is a beautiful experience.

"I think it's akin to watching a black and white TV,"

McGowan said. "All of a sudden the black and white TV turns into beautiful color."

The Sisters man is adamant that getting hearing aids is worth the effort and whatever expense is entailed.

"It changed my life," he said. "It really did."



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