



IF YOU OFTEN FEEL as if you can't hear yourself think, you're right. Between your neighbor's snow blower outside the kitchen window and the volume-challenged children in the next room, the constant din of modern life takes a toll. A 2012 study published in *The Journal of Neuroscience* found that it was harder for subjects to remember simple sequences of recorded numbers (normally an easy task) when they had to strain to hear them. Researchers theorize that may be because the part of the brain that processes auditory signals is the same one that handles short-term memory. Noise may also negatively affect kids' developing brains: In her landmark research from 1975, environmental psychologist Arline Bronzaft, Ph.D., found that the reading scores of elementary students in classrooms located next to train tracks lagged a full year behind their peers in quieter classrooms on the other side of the building. "Noise makes it more difficult to learn," says Bronzaft. "When you can't stop noise, it can create incredible stress. Learned helplessness—the feeling that you just have to sit there and take it—sets in and can increase stress more." It also flat-out makes you feel fried, especially if you're a parent. Your brain has to labor mightily to sort out what sounds are important (a crying baby) and what can be ignored (the low roar of the dishwasher), says Mandy Cerka Mroz, an

THE GUIDE
family

Can I have some peace and quiet!?!?

If you live in a household with other people—plus chirping cell phones, talking stuffed animals, and a constantly running washing machine—good luck. But you (and your kids) desperately need a break. Here's some sound advice.

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audiologist in Red Wing, Minnesota, and the director of the consumer-information site HealthyHearing.com. (Indeed, the word noise derives from the Latin word *nausea*.)

When podcasts stream uninterrupted and Instagram alerts pop up sporadically, there's also less time for all of us to turn inward, says Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, Ed.D., a professor of education, psychology, and neuroscience at the University of Southern California. "The brain works in networks that are in balance with each other," she says.

"One allows you to focus on what is happening in the outside world around you, the other looks inward." It's this inner network that helps us make meaning of our lives. Constant noise pulls our attention ever outward and upsets the balance.

So quiet sounds nice, but how do you get it? It comes down to two things, say experts: Find ways to reduce your exposure to the worst noise offenders, and steal more restorative moments of blissful quiet. It's not a radical, new notion: "Every spiritual tradition incorporates some kind of daily stillness, from meditation to prayer, to shut out distractions," says Christine Carter, Ph.D., a sociologist at the U.C. Berkeley Greater Good Science Center and the author of *The Sweet Spot*. These kinds of quiet practices can also restore us by tamping down our fight-or-flight response, says Alice Domar, Ph.D., the executive director of the Domar Center for Mind-Body Health, in Waltham, Massachusetts, and an associate professor at Harvard Medical School. The result, she says, is that over time our bodies and minds can become less reactive to the cacophony that surrounds us. Sounds heavily. Here are tips for every age.

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CHILDREN

Why they need quiet

Research shows that even moderate background noise can interfere with the ability of babies to learn new words. And a 2014 study published in *Nature* noted that baby mice exposed to moderate, persistent noise for 10 hours a day had a 70 percent reduction in the formation of blood vessels in their brains compared with those in quiet cages. Elementary-age kids spend seven or more hours a day in the cacophony of school. "Everything that comes in through the senses needs to be processed," says Victoria Dunckley, an integrative psychiatrist in Los Angeles and the author of *Reset Your Child's Brain*. "Dealing with constant input lowers the brain's ability to work through emotions and make sense of what's being learned."

How to get it

Reduce background racket. "Turn on music and dance with your kids, but then turn it off," says Mroz. "We think when a child is doing a puzzle, we should have some fun music on in the background. Just let him focus on the puzzle." Don't leave the TV on, even if it's educational. And check your own volume. "If you have to talk louder than normal to get kids' attention, there's something you are competing with," says Mroz. Turn off the

blender to ask your son to set the table rather than adding more noise by yelling. **Institute a daily quiet time.** You know that once little kids give up a nap (condolences), they still benefit from an hour of quiet time—dim lights, a few books. But older kids who have been in a noisy environment (like basketball practice) also need 30 minutes or so to recover, mentally and physically. Noise over 85 decibels, about the level of a garbage disposal, may harm hearing with prolonged exposure. "The tiny sensors in our ears called hair cells get blown down by vibrations. In quiet, they will bounce back," says Mroz. (Picture grass that has been trampled but that springs up again given time.)

Try mindfulness together. Bringing attention back to the present instead of worrying about a spelling test can be a good stress reducer, says Amy Saltzman, M.D., the author of *A Still Quiet Place for Children*. Simply sit together and listen for three minutes to all the sounds that you can hear—nearby, faraway, and inside your own body (heartbeat, breath)—plus the "silence between and underneath all sounds," says Saltzman. For toddlers, try a simple yoga move—child's pose!—to encourage calm, says Dunckley.

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BEAT THE WINTER BLUES

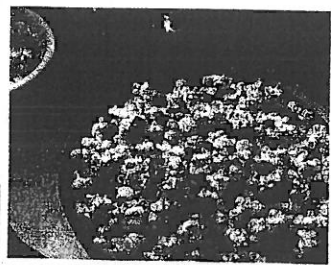
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TEENAGERS

Why they need quiet

Many teenagers have sprouted new permanent body parts—headphones. At the same time, at this stage of development, adolescent brain circuits are being remodeled and becoming more specialized. Could it be a perfect storm? "We are potentially growing a generation of brains that are wired to focus on external stimulation rather than reflecting inward. Quiet time away from the constant stimulation can strengthen that internal focus," says Immordino-Yang.

How to get it

Enforce device-free times. Sure, you've heard it before, but ever multiplying gadgets are a major source of noise and distraction for teens. Carter's own family includes four teenagers. (Just imagine her impressive data plan!) And she advises setting specific rules to maintain oases of quiet. "Teens need bright lines," she explains. "Your phones are never allowed in the dining room, the kitchen, or the bathroom. Half an hour before bedtime, all the devices have to be in the charging station where we can see them." Be clear about the consequences: "If we find you using your phone in bed, you lose it for 48 hours." (And be sure to follow the house rules yourself.) Consider following a 60/60 rule: No more than 60 minutes of listening to an iPod at a time at no more than 60 percent of maximum volume.

Dare to not talk. You know at this stage you need to keep the lines of communication wide open. But that doesn't mean that whenever you're together you pepper your teen with tennis-practice logistics, grill him on his plans for the winter formal dance, or help him bone up on SAT words. "Teens often just want a parent to be there with them, particularly if they're feeling moody. You don't have to necessarily be saying anything or fixing anything in their lives," says Dunckley. Chop vegetables for dinner in companionable silence. "Even with our own family members, not talking can feel uncomfortable at first. Eventually you will move through it and feel a sense of peace," says Dunckley.

ADULTS

Why you need quiet

When you have an endless to-do list, taking time to quietly zone out can seem frivolous and—shudder—unproductive. Quite the opposite, argues Carter. "When we are staring into space, letting our minds wander, our brains are making connections between things we didn't previously see as connected. That can lead to out-of-the-box creative insights," she says. Turning down the noise in your life can also reduce your stress level so you can soldier through that same to-do list without biting your spouse's head off.

How to get it

Make quiet your new default. Much of the clamor in our lives is a result of mindless habits. Do the simple things: Leave your cell phone at home when you walk the dog, and turn off e-mail and social-media notification dings. Mroz moved the television to her basement family room so she wouldn't snap it on automatically when she arrived home.

Try noise-canceling headphones. Because they block out environmental noise, they can create a refuge even when you're trapped somewhere loud. "If I'm on an airplane, I'll put mine on while I read a book or look out the window," says Mroz. "It's much more relaxing."

Change your attitude. For annoying—not deafening—noise that you can't control (the copier next to your cubicle, say), reframe your thinking. "It's our perception of noise and our reaction to it that counts," says Nando Pelusi, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York City. Tell yourself the sound is a little distracting but that you can handle it—not that it's pure torture and you may go insane.

"Recasting it gives you some power over the effect the noise has on you," he says. Another helpful mantra to repeat: "Disturbances in air vibrations don't have to create disturbances in my emotions."

Hide out. You may need more quiet than others do. "Introverts recharge by having peaceful time alone," says Kirsten Brunner, a therapist and life coach in Austin, Texas, who blogs at Baby Proofed Parents. And even extroverts need quiet away from toddlers. Escape to that hallowed sanctuary of moms everywhere, the bathroom, for a minute—or 10—suggests Brunner: "I hear parents talk a lot about the guilt they feel over wanting breathers from their children. Throw out the guilt. You're normal." Hear that?



SILENT TREATMENT

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