

Silence is golden

Silence is essential for our health in today's loud, fast-moving world.
Judy Hobson meets the granddaughter of an anti-noise pioneer

IN THIS noisy, fast-paced world it is increasingly difficult to find a silent place where we can be still and calm and recharge our batteries, but for our health's sake it is important that we do.

Noise pollution is now considered so severe that the World Health Organisation (WHO) says it is the second most pressing threat to human health after air pollution.

And some experts fear that because humans are now surrounded by so much noise, they could lose their ability to pick out tranquil, soothing sounds such as leaves rustling in the breeze, waves lapping on the seashore and birdsong.

When we venture outside, our ears are assaulted by traffic noise, the pounding of pneumatic drills and other people's mobile phone conversations. Indoors, they can

be subjected to a neighbour's loud music, a continually barking dog plus the shrill beeps and persistent hum from the labour-saving gadgets found in the 21st century home.

Noise is an unseen pollutant with many unaware of the impact it has on their wellbeing. All that din triggers a domino effect. First there is a surge in the stress hormones – adrenaline and cortisol. This causes blood pressure to rise, which increases the risk of heart attack.

“People have a stress response to noise, their heart rate increases, their blood pressure goes up and their stress hormones kick in. When the body is stimulated in this way over a long period, it causes ill health”

Professor of Psychiatry Stephen Stansfeld

Sensitivity to noise, however, can vary, with some people able to tolerate more of it than others. But, warns Professor Stephen Stansfeld, professor of psychiatry at the Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine in London, even if you no longer find noise annoying, it is having an impact on your body.

And he warns “It's possible that long-term exposure to it could lead to the onset of dementia.”

A recent US study found that when noise disrupts sleep regularly, it increases the risk of developing an irregular heartbeat (atrial fibrillation) by 26 per cent. Other studies suggest there is a link between noise and the development of Type 2 diabetes and obesity.

Prof Stansfeld says: “Having your sleep impaired isn't good for the body's healing processes. Indeed, I'd like to see more effort put into reducing the noise found in hospitals at night.”

A number of European studies published over the last five years, he points out, show that noise from air and road traffic raises blood pressure and increases the risk of heart attack.

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Former TV actress Poppy

Szkiler, 42, is the granddaughter of John Connell, the founder of the Noise Abatement Society. Polly is the managing director of Quiet Mark, the charity's trading arm, which rewards manufacturers for excellence in quiet product design.

She says: “Put simply we're not caring for our ears and are in serious danger of overloading them. They simply can't cope with all the noise they're being subjected to.”

“Sadly, nowadays it can feel foreign to people to be quiet. They no longer understand the benefits of silence. Living at a fast pace surrounded by noise now feels normal to them, but this isn't how we're meant to be and it's causing disease.”

Over the past 20 years planes and cars have become quieter, but, Prof Stansfeld points out, there are a lot more of them.

“In addition,” he says, “the quiet period we used to experience overnight has grown shorter. Today we're also subjected to the low-frequency background noise emitted by the gadgetry in our homes and this can make us tired and irritated.”

The professor firmly believes having more places where people can go to find peace and quiet would be helpful.

“For both your physical and

mental health it is very important to have a place where you can go to be silent. Being in tranquil places makes you feel better and provides you with the opportunity for psychological restoration. We know that when people have access to green parks they experience lower rates of depression.”



A scene from the film *In Pursuit of Silence*

Continuing granddad's pioneering work

Poppy describes her grandfather John Connell as a visionary. John, who lived in Bromley, Kent, with an office in London's Bond Street, introduced the first refrigerated lorries into the UK. In 1959 he founded the Noise Abatement Society after noticing how much noisier London had become since the end of the Second World War.

Poppy says: “The traffic had increased and people were being woken up in the early hours by the clanging of milk crates and the rattle of dustbins. He wrote a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* expressing his concern and received sacks of letters of support from members of the public.”

“This led him to set up the NAS which then lobbied MPs and led to the Noise Abatement Act of 1960 and the acknowledgement that noise has an impact on health.”

A practical man, John's work led to the introduction of plastic milk crates and rubber dustbin lids.

Today his daughter Gloria Elliott, Poppy's mother, runs the NAS from Brighton while Poppy runs Quiet Mark from its headquarters in Clapham, London. The scheme was set up four years ago in response to complaints to the NAS helpline about the excessive noise from household tools and appliances.

Poppy says: “One of the

challenges we face is that noise pollution is subtle. People have forgotten how calming it is to find a quiet place to enjoy the silence and let everything go. Doing so is a physical release and you get a little bit of healing back in return. I try to set aside 30 minutes of quiet time each day before going to work even if it means I have to get up a bit earlier. I also set boundaries and never look at e-mails after 9pm and don't have



Poppy Szkiler

Top complaints to the NAS helpline

Noisy neighbours who play loud music; dogs that bark all day; flats with poor sound insulation so you hear the people above walking around; leaf blowers; the hum from wind farms; and aircraft noise.

The NAS advises callers how to discuss noise complaints with their neighbours in a way that encourages a favourable response and avoids confrontation.

■ If you have a noise problem, contact the NAS helpline, tel: 01723 823850, or e-mail: (info@noise-abatement.org).

technology in the bedroom.”

To help people understand the benefits of factoring in some peace and quiet into their busy lives, Poppy worked as the associate producer of the film *In Pursuit of Silence* with the Los Angeles documentary maker Patrick Shen. The film shows how society's race towards modernity, technological innovation and rapid urbanisation is in danger of pushing silence into the history books and enables cinemagoers to have their own encounter with silence.

It also illustrates the impact of noise, and is now on release in the UK, the US and Japan.

Prof Stansfeld says: “I welcome this film because it means more people will gain greater knowledge of the effects noise has on their health and will recognise the benefits of having quiet times in their lives.”

Making the world quieter

It was in 2012, sitting around the kitchen table, that Poppy and her mother hit upon the idea of establishing a commercial arm of the NAS that would award manufacturers who developed quieter products. Their teams of specialist acoustic engineers look at everything from dishwashers and extractor fans to cars and planes.

Poppy says: “It has turned into a minor miracle and we have now endorsed more than 70 global brands. You can find the Quiet Mark purple symbol on everything from kettles and food mixers to flooring, forklift trucks and insulation material.”

“We're pleased Virgin Atlantic is in the process of renewing its fleet and

that by 2020 the airline will have planes that are 50 per cent quieter.”

The manufacturer pays Quiet Mark to cover the cost of assessment by their acoustic engineers. A percentage of the profits goes towards supporting the work of the NAS.

“Our vision,” Poppy says, “is to be a one-stop shop for quiet things.”

She started off the venture by cold-calling marketing directors, encouraging them to consider that making their product quieter could be a new way to market it.

“We know from research carried out by John Lewis that up to 70 per cent of customers are looking for more peace and quiet when purchasing electrical goods.

People just do not want that shrill high-pitched sound you get from some washers and dishwashers.”

Poppy regrets that when new homes and offices are being designed, the noise factor inside is frequently ignored. What we need, she says, is a new generation of building engineers with fresh ideas on how to keep these buildings quieter.

“This,” she says, “is our next big challenge. Meanwhile, I invite *Choice* readers to try having a period of silence and to see how it affects the rest of their day. Find a place in your home where you can have some peaceful moments alone. If you do, I'm sure your mind will become clearer, you'll feel calmer and inspirational ideas will follow.”

Find out more

■ For more information about Quiet Mark and its purple symbol, log on to: (www.quietmark.com).

