# Dealing With Bipolar Disorder and Noise Sensitivity

by FLISS BAKER

## Bipolar Disorder and Noise Hypersensitivity

Noise sensitivity is a fascinating subject because the change in the volume, sharpness or tone of a sound can be so overwhelming it can have a number of effects, dependent upon the bipolar episode being experienced. However, there are scientific reasons why our bodies become so sensitive that any type or level of noise can become intrusive and impossible to cope with.

Noise sensitivity is not often one problem alone. When our body experiences a threat, whether it be neurological or psychological, our stress levels increase and our body attempts to protect itself.

Our senses are heightened and hypersensitivity kicks in. This could be noise related or relating to light, touch, sound, smell or spatial awareness.

### Recognized Diagnosis

Hyperacusis is recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association. It is a health condition characterized by an increased sensitivity to ranges of sound, which leads to difficulty in tolerating everyday noise.

This can occur through brain and neurological damage where sensory information to the body is disrupted, creating neurological errors. There are many causes of hyperacusis including bipolar, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

For instance, someone may develop sensitivity to noise related to a past emotional trauma or a recurring cause of anxiety. This conditions the brain to have negative feelings associated with certain noises.

### How Are We Sensitive to Noise?

Individual noises, such as the constant whir of the washing machine, the repetitive beats of music, the buzzing of technology, ringing phones, loud conversations, unexpected sounds, a car engine running and more, can be overwhelming. An accumulation of them can be intolerable and send you into such a state of anxiety you feel as though you are going to jump out of your body!

It is interesting how noise sensitivity plays a very different part while in the midst of a manic episode. Of course anxiety can still be a result, but I have felt very positive feelings from noise before.

When I have listened to music, every note and melody has been played with such clarity my body has filled with warmth and happiness. Every noise is magnified like surround sound, but instead of triggering shock, it can feel as though every sense is heightened.

**My Negative Experience**

Unfortunately I have experienced noise sensitivity in more negative ways than positive. Back in February 2015, I had a rare drug reaction with my bipolar medication and I was sent into neurological turmoil, which sent me into a mixed effective episode.

My body must have been so stressed it went into hypersensitivity. I was literally running from anyone and everything for fear of them triggering an uncontrollable response.

In the hospital the nurses did not understand. I was ridden with anxiety and begged them to speak quietly and warn me if they were going to touch me.

They didn't listen and leaned forwards, quickly invading my personal space and causing me to whimper. They spoke loudly as if I couldn't understand what they were saying, which made me cover my ears to muffle the magnified sound.

I think this action must have made me look ignorant, but of course it was because I was suffering with hypersensitivity.

One nurse spoke to my family around the corner from my cubicle and I could hear almost every word so sharply it was as though sound was traveling so far it was almost unreal.

At one point I laid in the fetal position, covering my ears and repeating the words, “It's OK Fliss, stay calm.” To anyone I must have looked like a mad woman, but my words and protective actions made complete sense to me.

One doctor recognized what was happening and responded to every instruction I gave for no sudden movement, low level noise and a calm tone.

**How Do We React?**

Our reactions can be automatic and out of our control.  There are things we can do to help manage them, but we often revert to what immediately helps us — which is usually avoidance.

If we feel we are going to face a stressful situation, one we can't cope with or we feel we might embarrass ourselves, our natural instinct is to run. I remember going to the theater when I was ridden with anxiety and loud noise was a problem. As I sat in the theater seat I was rigid with a growing fear to leave.

I could hear the wrappers of the sweets as the music started and the additional noise of the person behind me talking made me want to strike out. I spent the whole of the first half focusing on every individual sound. By the second half my body had settled, but the initial experience had been spoiled.

**My Therapy**

My cognitive behavioral therapist helped me a lot with my hypersensitivity. Firstly, he reassured me that it was normal to feel anxious and sensitivity was our body’s way of working properly.

If we feel threatened, our senses sharpen. If we acknowledge what our body is doing and accept how it makes us feel, we can work through ways of managing it to the best of our ability.

- Try not to fear things like noise sensitivity — our body is responding to what it feels is a threat.
- Accept fear is part of everyday life and as human beings, we all feel it.
- Learn self-compassion to soothe ourselves and say, “It's OK, this is my body being sensitive, what can I do right now that will help me?”
- It’s good for us to face our fears, but if we need to get up and leave somewhere, we should give ourselves the permission to do it.

- Do whatever you think will help you; don't be afraid to turn the volume down, leave a room or tell people if you are struggling.
- Remember diaphragmatic breathing will calm the body quickly.
- Practice mindfulness by bringing your mind to the present, focusing or feeling on the immediate to distract and calm the brain.

I hope this helps. Noise sensitivity as part of hypersensitivity can be very overwhelming and feel difficult to control. If you suffer with this as an ongoing problem it is worth speaking to your doctor in case medication or therapy is required.