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Feature Article

Sound Pollution: Getting an Earful

by Sandi Corbitt-Sears, StaffingU Director of Communication

Have you noticed how noisy our modern world is? Well, maybe you haven't. We humans seem to adapt to all sorts of things that our fellow creatures might find intolerable, including unnatural (i.e., manmade) sounds.

Granted, many of those sounds are breathtakingly beautiful. For example, as I write this, I'm listening to Sarah Brightman's gorgeous voice, accompanied by a full orchestra. Good sounds can go bad, however. That happens when any sound is too loud, goes on too long, or enters into competition with other sounds. Then sound becomes "noise."

In the Background

All the machinery that enriches and simplifies our lives adds to the background noise level we endure every day. Computers, printers, refrigerators, clocks, furnace blowers, air conditioning units, coffee makers, humidifiers, etc., all contribute their own distinct sounds. So do telephones, sirens, horns, alarms, radios, televisions, and stereo systems. Wherever we go, manmade sounds are there.

Even natural sounds can become noise under the right circumstances. Dogs barking, couples arguing, or a group of people engaged in lively conversation may become annoying. And when natural sounds combine with manmade noises, the resulting din can easily overwhelm the senses.

What's the Problem with Noise?

So, we live in a noisy world. We're used to it, aren't we? We might even be addicted to noise. If you doubt it, try sitting in a completely quiet room for an hour and see how long you remain calm. Of course, finding a completely quiet room can be a challenge in itself.

The problem with noise is a matter of quality and quantity. A certain amount of sound improves and enhances our existence. Beyond that point, sound becomes just another form of pollution. It negatively affects our health and well-being just as surely as air or water pollution does.

Noise-Induced Hearing Loss

Noise is the leading cause of hearing loss in the United States. Although it can be prevented, when noise-induced hearing loss does occur, it's permanent. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration warns that continued exposure to noise over 85 dBA will eventually harm hearing. The higher the dBA level, the shorter the amount of exposure required. To give you a point of reference, normal speech comes in at 60 dBA, a ringing telephone at 80, and a noisy restaurant at 85. A football game in a typical stadium assaults the ears at 117 dBA.

Fortunately, hearing loss builds slowly over time and there are usually a few warning signs before the condition becomes severe. If you have any of the following signs of hearing loss, have your hearing checked by a licensed audiologist:

- A ringing or buzzing in your ear (tinnitus) immediately after exposure to noise.
- A slight muffling of sounds after exposure that makes it difficult to understand people when you leave the noisy area.
- Difficulty understanding speech; that is, you can hear all the words, but you can't understand some of them.

Health Problems and Noise

Excessive noise doesn't harm only your hearing. It has been shown to adversely affect sleep patterns, blood pressure, and digestion. Recent studies show that even moderately noisy open offices can contribute to health problems due to higher levels of stress, as measured by the amount of the hormone epinephrine. Elevated levels of epinephrine contribute to heart disease and have been implicated in musculoskeletal problems and high blood pressure.

The Impact on Productivity

When you think of noise in the workplace, the high-intensity sound levels found in industrial settings usually come to mind. But the average staffing or recruiting office may produce enough low-intensity noise to cause big

problems.

When unwanted sounds and chronic noise increase stress levels, it directly affects concentration, mood, and tolerance. It's not a coincidence that when we're stressed, we seek "peace and QUIET."

A study conducted by Gary Evans, a leading expert on environmental stress, demonstrated that workers in offices with moderate noise levels routinely showed evidence of less flexibility and persistence in solving problems. Interestingly, although they had high levels of the "stress hormone" epinephrine in their systems and their quality of work was clearly affected, the workers didn't perceive themselves as stressed or less productive. They were experiencing the effects of physiological and psychological stress - and oblivious to any problems it was causing.

Those findings point to a need for businesses to safeguard employees from the potential dangers of noise-induced stress. Staff whose jobs require them to concentrate and focus for extended periods of time may be especially vulnerable. Fortunately, a few simple fixes can reduce the noise and the stress, while improving productivity and office morale.

Turn Down the Volume in the Office

If a lot of external noise from a nearby busy road or neighboring offices intrudes into your workplace, consider adding insulation to walls and/or heavy drapes to windows to soundproof the office. Cover floors with carpet or rugs, add a tile ceiling, and install sound-absorbing dividers in open areas to block the transfer of noise from one area to another.

Staff who sit near other workers with responsibilities that produce excessive noise are especially likely to suffer the effect of noise-related stress. It can help to separate workers who use the telephone extensively, such as sales staff and customer service representatives, from those who need quiet for concentration. Consider making a quiet, enclosed room available for use when intense concentration is needed.

Rearrange workspaces so that employees won't be continually distracted by the sounds from air conditioners, fans, and noisy office equipment. Place copy machines, fax machines, and other shared noise-makers in a separate room, if possible.

Position foam pads under small appliances to diminish vibration noise, and buy quieter versions of noise-producing products whenever possible. Turn off noisy equipment when it's not in use.

Monitor the use of radios and other audio equipment in the office. The sound may be soothing to one person and extremely stressful for his/her neighbor. One solution is to allow employees to listen to music only through headphones.

Dial Down the Sound

The office environment is only one source of noise pollution. We're exposed everywhere we go, including our own homes. Fortunately, we have more control over our exposure to noise than we realize. It's primarily a matter of becoming aware of the sounds in our environment and scaling them down...or distancing ourselves from the noise.

Here are a few ideas for dialing down the sound in our lives:

- Become familiar with the amount of noise produced by familiar items. <http://www.lhh.org/noise/decibel.htm>
- Whenever possible, turn down the volume on the noisemakers.
- Wear adequate hearing protection when operating loud machinery such as lawnmowers and power tools.
- Limit the time spent in excessively loud settings.
- Stay away from the speakers in any events that use them.
- Set music to a comfortable level for a quiet room and don't turn it up to compete with other noises.
- Regularly spend time in quiet settings...without adding noise.
- If you're bothered by excessive noise caused by someone else, address the issue directly but reasonably.

To learn more about the problem of noise pollution and what you can do about it at both a personal and community level, check out these web sites:

Noise Center

<http://www.lhh.org/noise/index.htm>

Noise Pollution Clearinghouse

<http://www.nonoise.org/>

Sandi Corbitt-Sears is Director of Communication for StaffingU, the leader in providing relationship-building techniques guaranteed to grow your business. For information on StaffingU's programs and services, including TeleClasses (live telephone-based classes), Virtual StaffingU (web-based courses), individual and group coaching, on-site training and speaking, and consulting visit www.StaffingU.net or call 866-SU-WORKS (789-6757).

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