

Keeping it

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This week, I had the pleasure of attending the ARR's Business Builder Day in Regina. Along with many others in attendance, one of the sessions that hit home the most covered the topic of mental health. As someone who lives with several mental health issues, I appreciate that this topic is becoming more and more prevalent in business discussions. The reality is, so many people are dealing with their own struggles, sometimes openly, sometimes privately and sometimes completely unaware that they exist. Here's my story...

I was 10 when my parents divorced. That's around the same time my night terrors began. Each night, shortly after I went to sleep, I would sit bolt upright and scream at the top of my lungs until my mom would come running down the stairs and wake me up to comfort me. I never knew why she was there, or why she had woken me up, but each night it continued the same as the night before. It became a family joke - mom would have company, and upon hearing blood-curdling screams from the basement they'd be shaken to their core, but mom would simply respond - it's just Renee - and carry on like nothing had happened. I've since learned that night terrors are often an outlet for children to relieve their stress. In some ways, I wish I still experienced this nightly relief of the millions of things running through my mind - my family might not appreciate the startling wake up calls, but I'd be a lot more relaxed!

It was around that same time that I started sharing a room with my sister and discovered that she breathed - really loudly - while she slept. (I'm sure her breathing was much more disruptive than my screaming...) One-two-puff. One-two-puff. All night long. I'd wrap my pillow around my head, throw stuffed animals at her, kick the wall, anything to release the rage that occurred at the simple sound of her breathing. Understandably, she was equally frustrated at my outbursts because she, well, breathed. (She once "sleep punched" me in the nose, causing an hour-long nose bleed. She's since confessed that she wasn't really asleep...) My parents managed the situation by purchasing noisy humidifiers that helped drown out the sounds that kept me up most nights.

Not long after, I noticed that my sister not only breathed, but she gulped her orange juice. Not just a swallow, but a gulp. And when she sang along to the radio, all I could hear was the "s" sound - that ssssss drilled into my brain and it's all I could focus on. And my mom sang, too - and she's a great singer. It wasn't that - it was the simple the act of her singing that got to me. And she brushed her teeth with the door open. The sound made me crazy. Like clench my fists, grit my teeth, scream into my pillow and do everything in my power not to kick someone crazy. When we'd take vacations with my dad, I didn't sleep, because he snored. I'd sneak into the bathroom, set myself up in the bathtub with a pillow and a pair of earplugs and read the newspaper of whichever locale we happened to be visiting to kill time through the night. I was likely the only 12-year-old to know every detail of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in Waco Texas because it happened to be the news story during an especially trying motorhome trip to Denver. (In case you're wondering, a motorhome bathtub is not an especially pleasant place to spend a week!)

In university, study sessions in the library were often cut short by a sniffer or the sound of music seeping through the headphones of a discman. (Yes, people still used discman's back then...) I couldn't go to the cafeteria, because without fail, an open mouth chewer would sit nearby. Or if not that, within my line of sight. Just seeing the chewing motion had the same effect as hearing the juicy sound.

I learned to accept that I was simply more sensitive to sound than others, and I built mechanisms to isolate myself from the intolerable sounds that triggered these really unpleasant emotions in me. People around me, my friends and family included, thought I was obnoxious and simply ridiculous and should learn to suck it up and deal with the sounds - it didn't bother them. Why should it bother me? And, to be honest, I thought the same. But I couldn't deal. Breathing, singing, sniffing, snoring, whistling, chewing, throat clearing, nail biting, teeth brushing...so many things that others didn't seem to even notice were intolerable to me. I learned to travel with a fan - all the time. I carried earplugs and headphones with me. I brought sleeping pills on hotel trips, and I carefully manipulated every aspect of my life to minimize my exposure to the things that made me, well, crazy. If I knew someone was a loud chewer, I'd make sure not to sit next to them at a restaurant. I'd always pick the least desirable seats at a movie theatre to ensure popcorn chewers and nose whistlers didn't sit next to me. And when I travelled, I always ensured I had a place to escape in the night to get away from the sleep sounds of others. This was my normal. I was just especially fussy, and these were the consequences of my inability to react "normally".

Then one day, a friend tagged me in a Facebook post that changed my life. Something funny about being over-the-top annoyed by a loud chewer, along with the word "Misophonia". Thankfully, this happened in the age of Google and I looked it up. Misophonia. "Select sound sensitivity syndrome, sound-rage... Misophonia, literally "hatred of sound", was proposed in 2000 as a condition in which negative emotions, thoughts, and physical reactions are triggered by specific sounds." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misophonia>)

It was a real thing. I wasn't just a spoiled, self-serving brat who had to get her own way or she'd have a fit. It was literally something I had no control over - an actual mental illness. I was elated. And while it may sound absurd to have such joy over discovering I suffered from yet another mental illness (I had already been diagnosed with depression and anxiety) it was so reassuring to know that I was not alone, and that there was a reason for the irrational reaction I had to simple, everyday sounds. And while there's no "cure" to this condition, I've developed coping skills, and perhaps most importantly, I no longer suffer from the guilt and self-blame for being the way I am.

Unfortunately, mental illness is still stigmatized, and despite more efforts being made to overcome the stigma associated with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and the likes, there is still a long road ahead. While no decent person would ever blow smoke in the face of someone living with cancer, people find it funny to chomp gum in my face and mock me for my condition in similar ways. And while I joke as a coping mechanism, misophonia is a condition that often isolates me and robs me of relationships and many of the simple pleasures in life. So next time you consider making light of someone's struggle with mental illness, remember, it is a struggle and your compassion and understanding might go a long way!

