



# How One Audiologist's Personal Journey Shaped a Whole-Person Model of Tinnitus Care

*By Erin Walborn-Sterantino, AuD, CH-TM*

**I always felt fortunate that I knew** what I wanted to do early in my life. In high school, when I told my guidance counselor that I loved sign language and helping people, he suggested studying communication disorders. That path led me to audiology, which I fell in love with. It was science-based, analytical, and always novel. Every patient presented as a unique puzzle. I wasn't at a desk all day, and I could make an immediate difference in someone's life.

Graduate school unexpectedly prepared me to run a business. I was chosen to manage the university clinic,

a position most students avoided because the supervising professor was demanding. He constantly said, "If you don't know why you're doing something, don't do it." That mindset stayed with me.

After graduation, I completed a full-time, unpaid externship, which was standard at the time and very stressful. I relied on family support to get through it. When the externship was completed, the practice hired me. Unfortunately, I had an issue with the office manager, which resulted in me being let go since I was the easier one to replace, in their view. I was suddenly an unemployed 25-year-

old with a passion and nowhere to channel it.

My father suggested I open my own practice. With guidance from the Small Business Administration and a \$5,000 loan, I purchased essential equipment and began building from scratch while working part-time for a local ENT. Within a year, I was served with a lawsuit from my former employer. It was eventually dismissed, but the stress was enormous. Around that time, the migraines began.

The practice grew. I hired staff, got married, had children, and returned to school for my doctorate. From the outside, everything looked like a

smooth-running machine. Inside, I was running on adrenaline.

## Early Steps Into Mindfulness

In 2009, at a health fair, I met a hypnotist who described herself as a stress management specialist. She told me my migraines would not improve until I “put my stress down.” I was skeptical but curious. During a guided relaxation session, for the first time, I experienced what it felt like for my body to truly relax. She introduced me to Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), or tapping. It was my first real glimpse into mind-body work.

Soon after, a patient suggested myofascial release therapy. During one session, the therapist asked me to “get into my arm.” I had no idea what she meant, which made me realize how disconnected I was from the sensations of my own body.

In 2010, I traveled to China and Tibet on a qigong tour. My children were young, and my husband thought I was slightly out of my mind, but something about the trip felt important. Immersed in the program, it took me nearly two

weeks just to learn how to breathe properly from my belly. That realization humbled me. It was dawning on me that even though I knew how to be successful, how to manage, how to be there for my patients and family, I wasn’t managing the stress well.

When I returned home, I introduced simple breathing exercises and mindfulness concepts into tinnitus care. In 2011, I presented a poster at the Tinnitus Research Initiative conference in Buffalo, showing how to integrate mindfulness practices into audiologic tinnitus management. At that time, very few professionals were discussing the mind-body connection to tinnitus distress. I knew from personal experience that dysregulation of the nervous system, which mindfulness practices seek to address, mattered.

## The Year I Broke

Just before Christmas 2014, everything unraveled. At work one day, I developed central vertigo. I lost balance on my left side, developed double vision, and experienced hearing changes. I was hospitalized with what

was thought to be a stroke. When that was ruled out, not one medical specialist could find the problem. I was discharged with a walker and a profound sense of being broken.

I was forced to stop.

At home, I felt vulnerable in a way I had never felt before. One afternoon, lying on the couch, unable to get myself a glass of water, I heard chirping in my left ear. It was unmistakably tinnitus.

My reaction surprised even me. Instead of fear, I felt something closer to acceptance. Because I understood tinnitus, it’s mechanisms and effects, I understood how it behaved. I chose not to fight it. Each time I heard the chirping, I responded with assurance that my body was talking to me. Oddly, I felt grateful, with no resistance to the sound. After three days, it faded.

What remained was insight. I understood the sensory sensation of tinnitus, and the staggering loss of control, fear, and isolation caused by a disability no one could fix.

## Finding the Science

After that health crisis, I forced myself to regroup. Energy work and meditation had helped me, but now I wanted an evidence-based framework. Around 2015, I enrolled in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD. The scientific rigor behind the program mattered to me. As a clinician, I needed both experience and data.

I took the course multiple times before pursuing teacher training. Meditation shifted from something I did occasionally to something woven into daily life. I began understanding

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how to bring it “off the mat” and into the “real” world, where you often can’t control events and outcomes, which compounds stress.

Meanwhile, I had to confront another truth. I could not be my best as a clinician and be a fully engaged business owner. Managing staff and running operations were exhausting. After much reflection, I chose to sell the practice, not to a corporation but to another practitioner who shared my values. I stayed on as a clinician and focused on tinnitus care.

## Treating the Whole Person

Today, my appointments with tinnitus patients last two to three hours. Education is still essential—hearing physiology, sound therapy, retraining principles—but it’s only part of the picture. We discuss the nervous system, stress responses, breathing patterns, sleep, and the emotional load. No two treatment plans are identical because no two people are identical.


Chronic conditions often erode a person’s sense of agency. My role is not to dictate a solution but to help patients rediscover their own pathway to recovery. Sometimes that begins with sound therapy. Sometimes it

begins with breath. Sometimes it begins with simply feeling heard.

I now divide my time between clinical audiology and teaching mindfulness-based programs. I also serve as secretary for the American Tinnitus Association, supporting broader advocacy and education efforts.

If someone calls me a holistic audiology practitioner, I accept that. We are not just ears attached to a brain. Tinnitus can activate our entire nervous system. When we address both mind and body together, change becomes possible.

Years ago, when I first heard that chirping as I lay confined to a couch, unable to do the most basic things for myself, I understood the conundrum of suffering. If we resist and rebel against what is happening, the suffering intensifies. When we steady ourselves by learning as much as we can and setting small goals, moments of relief reveal themselves, one steady step at a time.

When I sit with a patient whose tinnitus feels overwhelming, I understand the terrain. And although the theory and physiology behind the tinnitus are important for my patient to understand, I also know that the way through the turmoil comes one breath at a time. 



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*integrates evidence-based audiologic care with mindfulness-informed strategies to support individuals living with tinnitus. Outside the clinic, she teaches Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) at mbsrny.com. Dr. Walborn-Sterantino practices at Audiologic Solutions, with clinics in Rensselaer, Hudson, Saratoga, and Queensbury, NY; learn more at GreatHearingCare.com.*

*Deeply committed to advocacy, education, and clinical advancement in the tinnitus field, she currently serves as secretary of the American Tinnitus Association Board of Directors.*



## Want to Go Deeper?

Hear Dr. Walborn-Sterantino in conversation with two people living with tinnitus in our talk, “*Shift Your Focus: Retraining Your Mind When Tinnitus Won’t Let Go.*” Together, they share practical mindfulness techniques, including breathing exercises and awareness practices, that can lessen the impact of tinnitus on daily life. Listen now: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv-h0C1OGg8>