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“Silence is golden,” but when it comes to your health can silence also be deadly?

“Silence is a source of great strength” *Lao Tzu*

When we stop bombarding the body with sounds, we may see benefits for our brain, our blood pressure and our breathing. Trouble is, for those living in an ‘age of noise’, silence has become almost extinct.

Silent meditation retreats

Imagine a place where you can’t talk, telephone, read, write or access the internet. Boredom can soon turn into bliss as the brain, from a state of chaos, finds peace.

The explorer Erling Kagge [6] has savoured a lot of silence during his treks to reach the ‘three Poles’ (North, South and the Summit of Everest). By shutting out the world, he has learnt to see the world more clearly and unlock new ways of thinking. In his words, he has discovered a “primal need for silence”; silence has become a friend, a comfort and a source of deeper riches.

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“You don’t have to go to Sri Lanka,” he says. “You can experience it in your bathtub”.

Scientific studies

When mice are made to listen to silence for two hours a day for three days, brain cells in the hippocampus (the part of the brain responsible for learning and memory) increase in number. Playing them Mozart’s Sonata for two

pianos in D major (transposed into the hearing range of mice) had a similar effect, though the effect was not as long-lasting. White noise or previously recorded pup calls had little or no effect on the number of neurons.

Dr Gerd Kempermann, lead author of the paper [7], suggests that silence triggers the production of more brain cells to increase alertness and readiness for 'future cognitive challenges'.

In humans [8], listening to slow music (whether slow classical, slow techno, rap or meditation Ragas) has been shown to reduce blood pressure, heart rate and breathing rate; inserting two minutes of *silence* into the music lowered blood pressure and breathing even further.

Is the most relaxing music then, the one with most pauses? Claude Debussy famously said, "Music is the silence between the notes." Could it be that the silence between the notes is also medicine?

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Silence is deadly?

"I found solitary confinement the most forbidding aspect of prison life. There was no end and no beginning; there is only one's mind, which can begin to play tricks," said Nelson Mandela, reflecting on his 27 years in prison.

A silent mind can be unbearable – and even drive you over the edge. In one experiment [9] from Harvard and the University of Virginia, some participants were so averse to a fifteen minute silence that they chose to self-administer an electric shock to escape the silence.

When silence is linked to loneliness, your physical health may also suffer. Loneliness has been shown to be associated with a 29 percent increase in risk of heart disease and a 32 percent increase in stroke.

There's another type of silence that is "killing good people" according to Prince William. It's not the lack of auditory input to your ears: it's failing to speak out when you're anxious or struggling to cope – and it's a major cause of suicide. Heads Together [10] wants to get people talking to "change the conversation on mental health", because they know that silence is sometimes a scream.

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