

Whatever Happened to Whistling?

By Gary D. Friedman, MD

When I was young, say, in the 1940s and 1950s, whistling was common. On the street, in school hallways and locker rooms and in the stores and workplaces one would frequently hear people whistling songs and other melodies. There was a mystery radio program called "The Whistler" in which whistling was the hero's trademark. Virtuoso whistlers sometimes appeared on variety shows. With a fair amount of effort, I learned to whistle as a child because I wanted to be able to do what so many others were doing. I then used to whistle a lot when a tune or theme was on my mind.

Now, wherever I go, I rarely hear whistling. To make sure that my poor high-frequency hearing is not deceiving me, I have asked a few others about

this and they confirm that there is a lot less whistling now than there used to be. My wife reminded me that whistling was almost universally a male activity; one rarely heard women whistling.

Has whistling nearly disappeared, and if so, why? Are people now more inhibited?—less happy? Is whistling less socially acceptable now? Has whistling merely gone out of style? Is whistling primarily an activity of youth, with whom I now have less contact? (I doubt it because I never heard my kids or their friends whistling.) Is whistling more common east of California, the state where I have lived for the past 31 years? (I spent my youth in Cleveland and Chicago; the last person I heard whistling grew up in upstate New York.)

What do you think?



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