

Listen for computers digital cries for help

When your computer is slow, life in general can crawl to a stop. It takes you longer to get e-mails, load a Web site, and even get your work done. That means more time sitting down rather than moving around living life.



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One way our com-

puters can tell us things are not right is by the sounds they make. Generally speaking unless you are specifically playing an audio clip, computers should run silently. If a PC is making noise it is either an older model or something is wrong with it.

Macs are by far the quietest computers made and you hardly ever hear an Apple computer making weird sounds. My wife's iMac is almost silent and we have to actually put our ear up to the display to hear the hard drive moving.

Computer hard drive noises are the most foreboding sounds since they can be precursors to hardware failure and file loss. Five years ago systems with IDE bus hard drives had noisy HDAs (Head Drive Assemblies) new out of the box.

Some of those hard drives were so audible that you could tell when your computer was

finished booting with your eyes closed by the conclusion of the hard drive noises.

Whether your computer is five days, five months, or five years old the important things to listen for is change in the noises. Some computers are just noisier than oth-

ers. The rule of thumb for personal computers is the better made the system is the quieter it will be.

This does not apply to servers since they are equipped with numerous exhaust fans running at high speed inside computer rooms where sound reduction is not an issue.

The most important sound you could listen for is an abnormal one from your computer's hard drive. If it is not booting and all you hear is a repeating loud clicking sound that means the hard drive has crashed and your files are history. But since you read my column you will have back them up already — right?

Sometimes hard drives fail slow and the sounds of the HDA activity increase over time. Be aware of changing audible patterns or behaviors. You know your computer better than anyone else and any inconsistency

you can hear will help you or your tech guy diagnose a developing problem.

It does not have to be complete hard drive failure that makes the sounds, but some new process that has induced abnormally heavy disk activity. Examples of these can be virus or spyware infestations or some application that has gone nuts and the computer requires a reboot.

To review, the hard drive noise level can be significant in determining the health of your computer. Over time the louder it gets means the sooner it may die. Listen and learn from what your computer's hard drive is trying to tell you.

Fan noise is another trouble indicator when things get noisy. When I have a client complaining of a noisy computer odds are one of the three fans are going out. Most computers have three fans in them being one for the case, one inside the power supply and a smaller one on the CPU chip itself.

Determining which one of those fans is the source of the abnormal noise can be tricky. My technique is to open the box and stick a pen into each fan one at time stopping them to see if the bad noise also stops. That way I can take it over to Harper at Computer Helpers so he can

swap out the right fan the first time.

Hopefully it is the case fan that is going out since it is the easiest to swap and the cheapest one to replace. The most expensive one is the power supply fan since we usually have to re-install the complete power supply which goes for around \$175 labor included.

Most PCs have speakers installed and operating since sound has become a vital part of our digital experience. Too many times have I been called out to a client site with no sound working and it turned out to be they had the "mute" enabled.

Please, for the love of Pete, check the speaker icon on the lower right system tray and look for the red circle indicating that the audio is muted.

One annoying sound that the speakers can produce is an interference noise caused by having a cellular phone too close to the computer's speakers. I have found that the cheaper the speakers are the more likely the interference noise can be picked up.

Either push back the speakers to keep your phone further away from them or buy some higher quality speakers.

It is kind of neat though when you hear a phone call coming into your phone over the computer speakers before the cell phone even rings. I've used that a couple of times to make people think I was psychic by pick-

ing up the iPhone just before it rang.

Any popping, cracking, or loud humming noises coming from the inside of your computer is always bad. These can be caused from capacitors swelling or the transformer in your system's power supply heating up which could even become a fire hazard. Any loud electrical sounding problems should be addressed immediately by unplugging your computer's power and getting it checked out right away.

When you first power up your computer, any abnormal beeping or unusual audible tones can be a warning that either your mother battery is degrading or your memory configuration is being modified. When I add RAM to a computer I will often hear

a tone produced by the POST (Power On Self Test) processing letting me know the amount of memory had been changed.

Sounds are one thing, but smells are another. Any strong abnormal smell from your computer most likely mean the electrical components are going bad, which can become a fire hazard and needs to be checked out quickly.

Bottom line: When computers get sick they try to tell us so let's start listening to them and their digital cries for help.

Next week's column: MAC hard drive health.

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