

Communication Strategies for People with Hearing Loss

Be an active and engaged listener. Whether you have normal hearing or a hearing loss, listening involves paying attention, thinking about what is being said and mentally filling in words that are not heard clearly.

1. Maintain realistic expectations
 - a. No one hears perfectly all the time
 - b. Hearing aids cannot restore entirely normal hearing
 - c. Successful communication takes focus
 - d. Be relaxed and have a sense of humor

2. Be an assertive listener and communicator
 - a. Communicate your listening needs so that your communication partners can help you.
 - b. Share the "Communication Strategies for the Communication Partner" handout.
 - c. Acknowledge when you do not understand what was said. *Don't bluff.*
 - d. Give specific examples of what people can do to help you hear better:
 - "Please speak a little more slowly."
 - "It would help me if you move your hand away from your mouth when speaking."
 - "Can you face me when you are talking?"
 - "Let's sit over here." (directing to a quieter or more well lit location)
 - Ask specific "where," "why," "when," "who", and "how" questions.
 - Repeat or rephrase what you did hear and then focus on what was missed.
 - Give two choices like "Did you say where is the ball or I'm going to the mall?"

3. Use Speechreading (more than just Lipreading)
 - a. Use all available visual speech information to help you decode the information
 - Facial expression
 - Body language
 - Lip movement
 - Contextual cues
 - b. Try to stay within a typical conversational distance of about 3-5 feet
 - c. Light should be shining on your conversational partners face, not shadowing it.

4. Reduce sources of background noise where possible
 - a. Turn down the noise. For example, mute the TV.
 - b. Move away from the noise sources.
 - c. Turn your back to the noise and put the person you want to hear in front of you.

5. Use assistive technology
 - a. Get a telephone amplifier or captioned telephone (CTAP)
 - b. Check out one of the listening systems that theaters offer. Just ask at the information desk.
 - c. Ask your audiologist about a personal FM system or a remote microphone.

6. Stress Management
 - a. You don't have to hear every word to understand what's being said
 - Go for the "gist" of the sentence
 - Relax and enjoy communication
 - b. If possible, prepare for situations in advance. Anticipate the topics that will come up.
 - c. It's ok to take "listening breaks." Disengage, relax and then reengage in the conversation.
 - d. Utilize stress management strategies and control your anxiety.
 - e. Have a sense of humor - be willing to laugh at communication breakdowns rather than be angry or depressed.

Communication Strategies for the Communication Partner

Be patient and empathetic. Communication challenges are frustrating for everyone involved. The effort and concentration required is hard work, particularly for the person with hearing loss.

1. Get his/her attention first so that (s)he is ready to listen.
2. If you are a care giver, make sure that the hearing aids are turned on, working well and inserted correctly.
3. Distance
 - a. About 3-5 feet is a good conversational distance.
 - b. Face the listener and make sure your face is well lit.
 - c. Remember, it is unlikely for the listener to hear you from another room or if you are facing away from him/her.
4. Control background noise
 - a. Mute the TV
 - b. Move away from the noise source
 - c. Choose quieter restaurants or quieter booths in the restaurant.
5. Speak clearly
 - a. You may need to speak more slowly than usual ensuring natural pauses in between words.
 - b. Don't fade at the end of sentences.
 - c. Use a normal tone and average volume. It does *not* help to over exaggerate speech sounds or speak very loudly.
 - d. Avoid chewing, eating, smoking, or drinking while talking. Keep your hands and papers away from your face.
6. Telephone
 - a. Control the background noise on your end. If you are in a crowded place or have your radio on, that noise is transmitted through the phone along with your voice.
 - b. Focus on the conversation. You will be more effective if you are concentrating on the phone conversation and not multitasking.
 - c. Use the alphabet to clarify. For example, say "B as in big not T as in turtle."

7. Check for understanding.
 - a. Clearly establish the topic being discussed to help focus the conversation. Establishing the topic lets the listener more easily fill in the words that (s)he is unable to hear well. Let the listener know when the conversation topic is changing.
 - b. Don't assume that the listener nodding in agreement means that (s)he understands what you are saying.
 - c. If there is a misunderstanding, rephrase the statement rather than just repeating it.
 - d. Above all, don't say "never mind" when your communication partner asks for something to be repeated.
 - e. Keep in mind that people understand less when they are tired or ill.

Communication is an essential part of our lives. Communication is a partnership. Please engage your family and friends with hearing loss in conversations. Don't be afraid to ask him/her question when you are unsure of what to do or how to help improve understanding.