



Can You Hear Me?

by MARIE WALL

Hearing health is often ignored. I believe because of agism and perception, many of us are willing to do to our ears what we would never do to our eyes – ignore our hearing health. It is unlikely that a person would wait five or six years to see an optometrist when they noticed their eyesight failing but I know several people, including myself, who let their hearing go for that long before receiving medical attention from an audiologist. At least two of the reasons for this illogical behaviour are a lack of awareness, denial that there is a hearing loss, or the belief that being hard of hearing is not so bad.

Hearing loss can be present at birth (congenital) or become evident later in life (acquired deafness), either may be inherited or due to ear damage. The purpose of this article is to promote awareness for adult onset hearing loss and steps to be taken if you or someone you know may need hearing care.

First, increasing your awareness and then taking steps to remedy the impact on your life is possible. If you have hearing loss, there is help. Both mechanical aids and surgical operations are available to improve your quality of life. Several members of my family have a congenital hearing loss, otosclerosis, and we have been dealing with the effects of deafness for 40 years. My first encounter with my own hearing loss occurred about 10 years ago. This was a very emotional experience and, foolishly, I opted to not act. Several years later I realized the impact this was having on my personal relationships and my work – both were suffering. I have been using a hearing aid now for about five years. One of my sisters opted to have the operation around the same time; for both of us, the positive effect is significant.

Jean-Pierre Gagné, a professor of audiology at the University of Montreal, says, “hearing loss can hurt people in more ways than one. Often it may lead people to choose not to interact with other people because it is so demanding, it is so effortful. So people tend to isolate themselves and stop doing activities where they will meet other people and this has some very negative impacts because it may lead to isolation and even depression.” The consequence of hearing loss can affect professional performance, social interaction and emotional health.

I have worked with teachers who were coping with high levels of stress in the classroom. In assessing the contributing factors for the stress and the need for sick leave, hearing loss can be a significant contributor to the ineffective coping ability at work. According to the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, classroom chatter, the din of computers, the hum of lights and outside distractions make classrooms noisy places, and when a teacher has hearing loss this noise can increase the level of stress due to difficulty of hearing and understanding. Research in low-level noise and stress indicate there is a subtle and negative effect on health and well-being. According to Dr. Alice H. Suter, an audiologist at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, noise-related problems “include high blood pressure, peptic ulcers, cardiovascular deaths, strokes, suicides, degradation of the immune system, and impairment of learning.” These are indicators of stress.

The social and emotional impact of hearing loss is very real. Teachers have told me they have stopped going to the staff room because the competing conversations make it too difficult to communicate. This can lead to isolation, misunderstandings, frustration and high levels of stress. The inability to engage with others, whether professional or social, affects one’s emotional health also. People who do not pick up on jokes or who mishear a phrase and make statements that are incorrect can feel embarrassed. Over a long time this can cause a drop in self-esteem and confidence.

The causes of adult onset deafness vary widely. There could be hearing loss from damage, aging or a genetic disposition to the deafness that does not manifest itself until adulthood. Whatever the underlying reason, the symptoms of hearing loss can be both physical and environmental.

Symptoms

- hearing but not understanding
- turning up the TV volume
- attempting to lip read for understanding
- feeling disoriented to sound direction
- speaking louder than others around you in an attempt to hear yourself

- tinnitus, which may be a compensation for not hearing sound
- social withdrawal
- fatigue

Indicators

- asking “what” or “huh” often
- others complain the TV is too loud
- focus on a person’s mouth and not the person
- hearing your name but not the direction it is coming from
- others complain you are speaking too loudly
- ringing noise in the ear
- too difficult to hold a conversation in a crowd, such as the staff room, so it is easier not to go
- tired after a period of active listening

A person may not notice they have the volume much louder than normal or that their exhaustion is due to working so hard to hear. Taking time to think about whether you are getting such feedback is a step towards better hearing health.

If you do have a hearing loss there are several things you can do to help yourself and in turn help the people around you. It is important to have an examination and hearing test by an audiologist. You can then investigate whether a hearing aid or surgery is best suited for you and make your best decision for hearing health. Developing skills and communicating your needs to others is also essential.

Communication is a key to better hearing. Let people know you are hard of hearing and give them a few tips on how to better communicate with you.

- When you are speaking with someone and having some difficulty, ask him or her to speak more clearly; it improves quality of hearing.
- When you are being addressed, ask others to be in the same room and in your line of vision before they begin speaking to you. You should also ask others to state your name first to ensure they have your attention. These go a long way in not having to ask them to repeat themselves or getting upset with you for not following what they are saying to you.
- If you are presenting to a large group, let the people know you are hard of hearing and need them to speak one at a time. I have found this very important in shoring up my confidence when facilitating group sessions.
- When attending a meeting sit near the front of the group so you do not pick up extraneous noise.
- If others are speaking too loudly or the speed is too fast or too slow, let them know a normal tone is better for understanding them.

While this article has been written from my experience and through research. I would like to thank Dr. Valerie Parrott who runs a clinic in St. John’s, treating patients throughout the province. I consulted with Dr. Parrott to ensure the information contained in this article is reflective of the experience of many of her patients.

May is Speech and Hearing Awareness Month. There is no better time to think about your hearing and if there are supports that can assist you in improving your professional, social and emotional health and well-being.

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