

### The Ability to Communicate

A grandchild's laughter, the wind rustling through the leaves of a tree; such simple sounds. Yet, as people age, they can begin to lose parts of their hearing and may miss out on sounds that previously seemed unmistakable. Having the ability to hear is the gateway to communicating with our loved ones and even the grocery store clerk. When people lose their hearing, they can feel isolated in group settings and may even feel embarrassed asking the speaker to repeat themselves. Additionally, a person with hearing loss may begin to withdraw from activities that they previously found joy in, causing them to feel unfulfilled. Our elders are especially at risk for feeling isolated due to their inability to hear, as hearing loss is quite prevalent in older generations. Approximately 1 in 3 baby boomers in the United States have some degree of hearing loss<sup>1</sup>. In addition, hearing loss is one of the most prevalent health conditions in older adults. We owe our elders access to their environments and can equip them with the necessary tools to ensure they continue to feel fulfilled as they age.

Why is it that so many people in this age range have hearing loss? Age is one of the major causes of hearing loss, as well as loud noise exposure. Many people have previously worked in environments with high levels of noise or may have taken up noisy hobbies that can lead to noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL). Working in noisy environments is unproblematic, as long as an individual is properly using a hearing protection device (HPD) such as earplugs or earmuffs. NIHL is completely preventable with HPDs, and it would be a disservice to current and future elders in the United States to not provide education on the importance of preserving one's hearing. Once hearing is lost it cannot be restored, thus we must do everything we can to preserve the hearing system for as long as possible.

In addition, many people are unaware that they have hearing loss. Over the most recent holiday break, my friends and I have been sharing stories of our parents and grandparents about their slightly amusing inability to hear us say things such as: "Good Morning," and "Hey Dad, can you help me?" Other stories include entirely one-sided conversations, that, while comical to us, make our elder family member feel frustrated and left out of the conversation. By sharing good communication strategies with our elders and implementing them ourselves we can ensure successful communication and continue to build on our family relationships.

Elders may also feel like they are losing their independence when they are unable to hear those around them. Every elder member of our society deserves to feel fulfilled and be as active as they are able to be in their community. As a society we must empower our elder counterparts by making it easier for them to listen and participate. Several steps can be taken to increase accessibility to the hearing world for those with hearing loss. To start, turning on captioning for videos and using real-time audio-to-text transcription phone applications can ease an elder's listening strain and allow them to be active in their environment. Education on hearing loss, available resources, and good communication strategies can further empower our elders and allow them to participate and engage with their loved ones. Increasing accessibility benefits all people, not just our elders or people with hearing loss.

Communication is an essential part of everyday life and is crucial for one's emotional fulfillment. It is imperative that we preserve our ability to communicate for as long as possible, thus preserving our quality of life. Often, people have not been educated on the importance of preserving their hearing for traditional means of communication and are unaware of the emotional side effects of hearing loss. As a society we cannot stand idly by while individuals pursue noisy hobbies and not use HPDs. It is a disservice to our elders to leave them uneducated on how noise impacts their hearing and what they can do to prevent NIHL. Many elders begin to

take up hobbies as their more open schedules provide time for different activities. Hobbies are a great way to improve one's quality of life and feelings of fulfillment. Noisy hobbies like woodworking, hunting, and even playing a musical instrument are great to pursue as long as HPDs are used. HPDs are affordable and easy to acquire at home improvement stores or even at online retailers like Amazon. Earmuffs are the simplest HPD to use and are great for elders with limited dexterity, while earplugs are more discreet. We owe the elders in our society the opportunity to preserve their hearing so that they can continue to participate in conversations and feel included. When one feels included and is able to communicate one feels emotionally fulfilled.

It may seem daunting to take on the task of educating a large portion of our society on the importance of hearing preservation, however there are several simple solutions that we can implement. Most elders visit their primary care provider at least once a year. A brief conversation about the importance of preserving their hearing and having an informational brochure available for distribution are two simple ways to solve this issue. Providing our elders with knowledge empowers them to take responsibility for their hearing healthcare. Equipping just one person with knowledge of hearing loss and its prevention can be a drop in the bucket to educating a large portion of the older members of our society. Educating our elders on hearing loss also reduces stigma surrounding the topic. This has a positive effect on elders pursuing hearing aids, other assistive listening devices, or making use of accessible technology that can improve their quality of life.

Education can also reduce the negative social aspects of hearing loss, including reducing embarrassment and feelings of isolation and loneliness. When elders are aware that they are not alone in their feelings they can begin to accept their hearing loss and implement life changes to improve their communication abilities. My uncle recently shared his experience with hearing loss, which prompted my father and his brother to chime in and discuss their communication challenges. This open conversation made my family members more comfortable discussing their hearing and positive experiences they have had after pursuing hearing aids. In addition, when elders are excluded from communication they may begin to feel depressed. A 2019 study found that 1 in 5 older adults have symptoms of depression, and even those with the mildest degrees of hearing loss are affected<sup>2</sup>. This confirms that hearing loss is not a harmless condition that has no effect on an elder's quality of life. Social isolation as a result of hearing loss is a very serious issue for elders and it is our responsibility to educate our elders on hearing loss, its prevention, and its treatment.

Treatment in the form of hearing aids may not be available for all elders, as budget-constraint or technology concerns may prevent access to these devices. Though diagnosis and treatment of hearing loss with hearing aid technology is the ideal solution there are several simple methods that can be implemented to assist an elder with hearing loss. Technology and accessible phone applications are excellent, however, not all elders may feel comfortable pursuing this approach. There are several simple and effective strategies for good communication that can be used to aid an elder's listening. It is likely that most people are already using these strategies on a daily basis, which increases the likelihood of acceptance of these techniques. Speaking face-to-face is critical for proper speech understanding. Speech has several nuances that can be missed by an individual with hearing loss. When we speak face-to-face with our elders we are providing them with subtle conversation cues, such as an eyebrow raise or a smile while speaking, that would be lost if our back was turned. Speaking face-to-face also gives an elder a visual advantage to decoding spoken language. Both people with hearing

loss and people with normal hearing use lip-reading to make listening easier. When a person with hearing loss can see someone's lips moving, they can piece together what was said by using visual cues and their residual hearing.

Another cost-free good communication strategy is minimizing background noise. When I visit my grandparents, I am nearly guaranteed to find the TV on at a high volume. Doing something as simple as turning the volume down on the TV or radio gives our elders with hearing loss a better chance to understand what is being said and reduces the likelihood of them asking for repetition. This leads to an entire household feeling less frustrated, as words do not have to be repeated over and over again. One should also reduce the distance between speakers whenever possible. Shouting from the upstairs hallway to the kitchen will likely result in frustration on both sides. Communicating with an elder with hearing loss by being in the same room gives them a listening advantage.

Gaining an elder's attention before speaking to them is another good communication strategy. By placing a hand on their shoulder or making direct eye contact we can ensure that an elder feels included in the conversation, understands that they are being spoken to, and that they are given the opportunity to participate and communicate. My family has implemented this strategy with my grandfather, who now feels that he is better able to follow the conversation and make himself heard. We owe our elders this opportunity, which will reduce their feelings of isolation and frustration that they experience when they are not included in the conversation. By sharing these good communication strategies with elders and their families we are providing our elders with an opportunity to engage with their environments. Education will empower our elders and help them to advocate for themselves in difficult listening environments.

To ensure the greatest quality of life and fulfillment for our elders we must provide them with information about hearing loss, as it is such a prevalent issue in older adults. Educating our elders on NIHL and its prevention as well as on good communication strategies and available accessible technology gives them the necessary tools to advocate for themselves and fosters their independence. We owe our elder's these simple good communication strategies to promote their well-being and quality of life as they age. We also owe them information on hearing loss and its effects so that they can be informed and make decisions to prevent hearing loss and preserve their residual hearing. Denying an elder access to either robs them of their independence and can lead to them feeling isolated and depressed. Fundamental human connection is essential to fulfillment, which is more limited when elders are unable to communicate due to their hearing loss. Older generations have paved the way for all of us, and it is our duty to continue to care for them by equipping them with tools for successful communication.

## Bibliography

- <sup>1</sup> Clason, Debbie. "Hearing Loss Statistics." *Healthy Hearing*, 30 Nov. 2019, [www.healthyhearing.com/report/52814-Hearing-loss-statistics-at-a-glance](http://www.healthyhearing.com/report/52814-Hearing-loss-statistics-at-a-glance). "Untreated Hearing Loss Linked to Depression, Social Isolation in Seniors." <https://www.kwqc.com>, [www.kwqc.com/content/misc/Untreated-Hearing-Loss-Linked-to-Depression-Social-Isolation-in-Seniors-562816391.html](http://www.kwqc.com/content/misc/Untreated-Hearing-Loss-Linked-to-Depression-Social-Isolation-in-Seniors-562816391.html).
- <sup>2</sup> "Untreated Hearing Loss Linked to Depression, Social Isolation in Seniors." <https://www.kwqc.com>, [www.kwqc.com/content/misc/Untreated-Hearing-Loss-Linked-to-Depression-Social-Isolation-in-Seniors-562816391.html](http://www.kwqc.com/content/misc/Untreated-Hearing-Loss-Linked-to-Depression-Social-Isolation-in-Seniors-562816391.html).