

Communication Strategies

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Hearing Loss can affect family, friends and work colleagues of the person with a hearing loss. Each person can play a role in reducing problems that can arise during a conversation. There are communication strategies for both the listener and partner which can help reduce conversation difficulties.

Simple tips can work, such as watch the talker's mouth, attempt to concentrate on the topic of the conversation, even if you do miss some words or phrases. Accept it can be tiring for people with a hearing loss to listen for long periods of time, explain to your partner you have to pay extra attention during conversation and may tire more easily than other people and want to go home earlier from outings.

New hearing aid users may have spent years 'tuning out' during conversations, movies, family get-togethers, due to not being able to hear well, and may have to learn to actively listen again.

Don't hide a hearing loss

Be honest about your hearing loss, people will be more likely to look directly at you when talking, and speak clearly. If your conversation partner knows you have hearing difficulties, there may be less misunderstanding if you do not respond appropriately, or if it appears you are ignoring the speaker.

If you are talking with a person with a hearing loss, do not shout or exaggerate your mouth movements. Speak clearly, a 'little' bit slower and a 'little' bit louder. Pausing between phrases will give the listener time to process what you are saying.

Use hearing assistive technology

If you own hearing aids, wear them. If you do not, check with a hearing healthcare professional to see what is new in hearing assistive technology. Improvements are continually being made in hearing aids, check to see what technology may be available to make your communication situations easier.

Refine your concentration skills

Pay attention to the speaker and attempt to improve your listening skills. Accept hearing may be difficult at family dinners and group events, enjoy your time at these events rather than be cross with hearing people.

Be prepared

Predict difficult listening situations and plan ahead. If you are dining out with friends, suggest a restaurant you know may be quiet, choose a day and time when it may not be so busy, familiarise yourself with the restaurant's menu, which can often be found online. Arrive early so you can choose a seat which may help with your hearing, be as prepared as you can to minimise listening difficulties.

When accompanying a friend or family member to an event that is likely to be a difficult listening situation, think of ways ahead of time to minimise communication problems. Try to arrive early so you can get a good seat, discuss the event topic as a way of anticipating what may be said. If you are hosting a social event and know someone is attending with a hearing loss, strategize as to how you might reduce problem situations. Choose a relatively quiet restaurant or a room with carpet for your event. The clatter of dishes and eating utensils can be harsh, consider finger food for your event. The effort you take to plan for a noise-reduced event will probably benefit ALL of your guests.

Strategies to clarify communication

Listener - Avoid saying 'Huh?' or 'What?' when you have heard at least something of what was said. Try saying 'I know you said you are talking about the new car you purchased, but I didn't catch what colour it is.' This way the talker does not have to repeat everything they said.

Communication Partner - If your listener has missed something you said, repeat what you said one more time, using clear, but not exaggerated, speech. If the person still does not understand, try rewording.

Determine the source of your difficulty

Listener – Analyse why you are having difficulty with a certain talker, then make polite requests. If they have a soft voice, ask them to speak a little louder. If they speak too fast, ask them to slow down so your ears can keep up! If they turned away from you while talking, ask them to face you when they speak.

Communication Partner - To speak clearly for people with a hearing loss face them, speak a little more slowly, a little more loudly, in a natural voice, not monotone. Try not to cover your mouth when you are talking, that prevents your partner from taking advantage of lip reading.

Verify what you think you heard

Listener: If you doubt you understood a message correctly, confirm with the talker what you heard.

Communication Partner - When giving directions or instructions, ask 'does that make sense?'

Think positive

Listener - Use positive words when you need help from your communication partner, such as 'Can you please speak a bit louder?' rather than 'You are going to have speak louder if you want me to hear you.'

Communication Partner - When the listener with a hearing loss asks you to say something louder, take it as a compliment, it shows they are interested in what you are talking about.

Be assertive

Listener - Let your communication partner know what you need to make a conversation easier. If everyone is talking at once in a meeting, suggest only one person at a time speak. If you are on a teleconference, suggest each person identify themselves when they say something, such as "This is Isaac, I think we should .."

Communication partner - If the person you are speaking with indicates they have a hearing loss and need you to speak louder or slower, try to accommodate their needs, but not too slow or too fast; not too loud or too soft. The changes you make will enable the conversation to flow more easily for both of you.

Listen with your eyes

Listener - Watch the speaker's face, you can get a great deal from visual cues on the speaker's face. Did the speaker say, 'I need to go home'? Or was it 'I need a phone'? Watch the person's face and you will see 'home' and 'phone' look different on the lips. The speaker's facial expressions may also help you understand.

Communication partner: - The listener will benefit by being able to watch your lips as you speak. Be sure to not cover your mouth with your hands and keep your face clear so visible features of speech are available.

Sometimes it's OK to break social rules

Listener – You know you should not interrupt and should wait until it is your turn to speak. However, if you are lost with the conversation as you did not hear, you should say this as soon as possible.

Communication partner – It is important to understand that what may seem rude may just be an effort by someone to let you know as soon as possible they are having difficulty following the conversation.

Be kind to yourself

Listener - Be patient with yourself, with family and friends, and with people you encounter throughout the day. Don't blame yourself or others for your difficulties. Just keep trying to use the tips provided here and stay positive, even when times are tough. Some days will be more difficult than others but a cheerful attitude and sense of humour can get you through these times.

Communication partner - Keep reminding yourself that although it may be difficult for you to converse with someone who has a hearing loss, it is a greater challenge for that person. Be patient, use the communication strategies outlined here, and appreciate your own good hearing abilities.