

Communicating with the hearing impaired

Suggestions for family and friends



Ear & Hearing
AUSTRALIA

Helping people hear better for life




Hearing Loss:

It's more common than you think

A recent study revealed that 22% of Australians 15 years and over have some form of hearing impairment. In people ages 71 and over, this rises to 74% of the population. The most common causes of hearing loss in older adults include exposure to loud noises, family history or simply the natural ageing process.

Hearing loss can interfere with the hearing-impaired person's quality of life. It restricts their ability to interact with others, prevents them from hearing important information, creates misunderstandings, heightens stress, causes unnecessary fatigue, and filters out the subtle sounds of nature. As a family member or friend, you play a crucial role in helping to meet the emotional and psychological needs of a hearing-impaired person. This is a role requiring understanding and support.



Communicating better with the hearing-impaired

Communication is the key to all human activities. It is necessary for learning, exchanging information and generally taking care of each other. When someone you know has a hearing loss, communicating as a friend or family member is challenging; more challenging than most people believe.

A damaged hearing nerve not only impairs a person's ability to hear sound, but also the entire system for interpreting what they hear. With the constant advancements in hearing aid technology, restoring ones hearing to near normal levels is fast becoming a reality. However we do have to acknowledge that good-quality, professionally-fitted hearing instruments are only one part of the solution. There are other techniques which relatives and friends can adopt in order to make conversation easier for the hearing impaired.

When you communicate with a hearing impaired person, there are a few simple rules to follow which will maximise the communication. If you follow the guidelines on the following pages, you can improve communication to the advantage of all involved.

Get the person's attention

It is very important that the hearing impaired person knows somebody is talking to him or her. It is important to let the person know the subject of the conversation.

Look at the person

- **Speak face to face.** Make sure your face is easy to see. Visual clues like facial expressions and lip movements do a lot to help listeners understand your words – but don't over emphasis your facial expressions or lip movements as this can hamper communication.
- **Don't try to converse from a different room or with your back turned.** It is easier to hear what people say when you can see what they are saying.
- **Ensure you stand where your face is well lit.** This makes it easier to see your facial expressions and to read your lips.
- **Do not chew food or gum, or smoke.** It makes it harder to understand what you are saying, and almost impossible for others to read your lips.
- **Speak one person at a time.** When you are in a group, take turns at talking and try not to interrupt each other. If the conversation changes suddenly, try to inform the person with the hearing loss; when they know what the subject is, it is easier to understand what is being said.



Reduce the background noise

For someone who is hard-of-hearing, the most difficult listening environment is background noise. Voices are difficult to hear because they are in competition with all the other noises, so:

- Try to eliminate background noise when holding a conversation. Turn off the television and close any open windows to muffle any noise from traffic.
- Move closer to your listener so your voice is louder than the background noise. This will also make your face and lips easier to read.

Alternatively, try to find somewhere quieter to talk.

Be patient and relaxed

- 1 Begin the conversation with casual topics (the weather, what the person had for lunch). Avoid crucial messages at the beginning.
- 2 Continue conversation with familiar subjects such as family members and special interests of the person.
- 3 Stick to a topic for a while. Avoid quick shifts from topic to topic.
- 4 Keep your sentences and questions short.
- 5 Give the older person a chance to reminisce. Their memories are important to them.
- 6 Allow extra time for responding. As people age, they function better at a slower tempo. Don't hurry them.
- 7 Give the person choice to ease decision-making ("Do you want tea or coffee?" rather than "What would you like to drink?")
- 8 Be an active listener. If you're not sure what is being said, look for hints from eye gaze and gestures. Then take a guess ("Are you talking about the TV news? Yes? Tell me more. I didn't see it.")



And remember ...

Talk to the hearing impaired person – not **about** them.

Most of these suggestions are based on common sense, but that does not diminish their importance. Most important is patience and understanding on our part – an understanding that each hearing-aid user will need to develop listening skills and adjust to the hearing aid at an individual pace. This pace cannot be rushed and it needs to be supported by family and friends.

Your attitudes can discourage the use of a hearing aid or they can help the hearing-impaired person realise the full benefits of wearing hearing aids.

Your support and encouragement are just as important as the hearing aid itself because family and friends need to adjust just as much as the hearing aid user. Otherwise, the hearing aid may fall into disuse & then there are no benefits at all.

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