
HEARING AND YOUR LOVED ONES



There are two types of conversations that happen with hearing loss...

Wife: "He's been ignoring me for years."

Husband: "She needs to speak up."

Wife: "I speak very clearly and everyone else can understand me. You're deliberately ignoring me."

Husband: "Well, I think you mumble."

Mom, in the dining room: "Did you take out the trash?"

Dad, in the living room: "I have plenty of cash. What do you need money for?"

"What? I don't want any money."

"Why did you ask for it?"

"What did you say? You're mumbling again."

It's been well established that communication and listening are fundamental to successful relationships. When communication is hampered in any way, including hearing loss, it can lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety and isolation. Hearing loss has the ability to negatively affect both sides of a relationship in a variety of ways. The individual with hearing loss may deal with feelings of judgement and exclusion and withdraw from social situations and conversations. For the loved one, friend, or family member, they may feel they aren't being listened to, and may become frustrated at having to repeat themselves or deal with loud TVs.

Audiologists not only provide care to those with hearing loss, they also help to bridge the communication gap between loved ones. There can be some very intense, personal conversations during a hearing evaluation, which the audiologist attempts to mediate at times. There is no doubt that untreated hearing loss affects all relationships, not just with loved ones. A recent study backs up this observed affect. In a study of 1,500 55-year-olds with hearing loss, nearly half reported a relationship had suffered because they cannot hear well. From personal to professional relationships, most rely on communication to help them be successful and meaningful. The question then is, how exactly does untreated hearing loss impact relationships? When left untreated, hearing loss can affect communication, social interactions, and family relationships.

Communication. Those with hearing loss often have difficulty participating fully in conversations at work, home, and in social situations. This can lead to breakdowns in understanding, such as the examples at the beginning of this article, or significant miscommunications at work, which can have dire consequences.

Social interaction. Hearing loss can progress slowly over time and those who have it tend to begin withdrawing from social situations that prove too challenging. This could mean avoiding time spent enjoying friends and family at restaurants, avoiding social interaction at meetings or religious events, or skipping out on your weekly bridge game. All of these things together can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Family relationships. Those with hearing loss may begin to feel they aren't being heard or listened to and become angry, stressed, or depressed. Family members who have loved ones with untreated hearing loss may sometimes experience feelings of frustration, annoyance, and sadness. All of these negative emotions put a strain on family and romantic relationships.

For the family and friends of those with hearing loss, sometimes a need is present to make a conscious effort to change the way we communicate. Things such as looking at the person when talking to them, getting their attention before telling them something important, and most importantly, having patience and understanding, can make a big impact on communication. However, there is a limit to how much work should be done by those without hearing loss. An audiologist, Dr. Hagberg tells the loved ones to "Stop being a living hearing aid. Everybody has one – a seemingly helpful caregiver, husband or wife who feeds back the information so the other person doesn't need to seek help." Secondly, he tells his patients who deny having a problem, even after testing "Go home and pay attention to every time they say, 'What?' or they miss the

punchline on TV or ask people to repeat something. They usually come back in a week" - ready for a hearing aid."

For those with hearing loss, it is important to not rely on your communication partners to be your "hearing aid." It is not fair to rely on and potentially stress out, your friends and family, when there is a reliable and validated treatment that will improve your life and the lives of your loved ones. Don't just take it from me though, hear it from one who finally took the leap to be fit with hearing aids. "My relationships improved dramatically when my hearing was corrected. Hearing loss took a toll on the people around me, even though we didn't realize it. They got frustrated and tired of having to repeat themselves, and I became equally frustrated with asking them to say things over and over. They often thought I was ignoring them. I thought they were always irritated. Being able to hear conversations, whispers, and all of the everyday interactions that I had been missing- this has probably been the most important way that hearing aids have improved my life."

I'll leave you with one last thought, well said and conveyed by Helen Keller; "Blindness cuts us off from things, but deafness cuts us off from people."

Resources

Image: <https://www.starkey.com/blog/2018/03/Communication-key-to-relationships>

"How does hearing loss affect relationships" <https://www.starkey.com/blog/2018/03/Hearing-Loss-impacts-relationships>

"Emotional effects of untreated hearing loss." <https://www.healthyhearing.com/report/50526-Emotional-effects-linked-to-untreated-hearing-loss>

"Why Won't They Get Hearing Aids?" <https://newoldage.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/why-wont-they-get-hearing-aids/>