

## ACTIONS “SPEAK” AS LOUD AS WORDS: BETTER CONVERSATIONS DESPITE HEARING LOSS



**Conversations are a cornerstone in connecting with people in our lives—friends, family members, acquaintances, people we pass on the street.** When we communicate, we share ideas, feelings, and information with others. “Sharing” is a two-way street that requires a lot of focus, energy, and patience, even when we have normal hearing. Add hearing loss into the mix, and things can get quite complicated and downright challenging. Often times hearing aid performance is blamed when conversations are difficult or impossible, but even the best, most well-managed hearing aids can seemingly let us down. Success depends on more than the hearing aids, however. Did you know that making even subtle changes to the way we converse can really improve our interactions? *(Continues inside)*

First, some background: hearing aids help, they don't "fix." Most would agree that all kinds of conversations—at home, in noisy places, in crowds or family gatherings—can still be difficult for people wearing hearing aids. Even with modern hearing aid technology, the hearing aids just don't "work" sometimes. There are a few reasons for this:

- We hear with our brains, not our ears. The ears play an important role in the hearing process—they react to sounds and "transform" them into nerve signals that are sent to the brain. The brain interprets those signals, causing us to "hear." Some brains do not process a talker's voice in the midst of lots of noise as well as others, even when hearing is normal. Adding hearing loss and/or advanced age (or both!) to the mix makes the situation immensely difficult.
- Hearing loss also causes the ear to work differently than it did when hearing was normal. We fit hearing aids to accommodate the difference, but that's not the same as fixing the hearing loss. People wearing hearing aids receive "imperfect" information because of the condition of the ears, even with the best hearing aids. The brain has to work harder to achieve "hearing" than when there is no hearing loss, and older brains do not work as efficiently as younger. People wearing hearing aids are still compensating for their hearing loss— not as much as when they don't wear hearing aids—but more than someone who has normal hearing. It's not hard to see why extra consideration is necessary for the best conversational experience.

**Read on to see what we can do when talking with someone who has hearing loss to make things better. Following these suggestions in your day-to-day interactions can create a more pleasant environment for everyone, especially when hearing loss is involved.**



**The Listener.** Do you have hearing loss? If so, there are some things you can do to make a conversation better. Keep in mind there is a big difference between hearing and listening: hearing is a passive action, while listening is an activity that requires effort and concentration. These pointers can help everyone, not just those with hearing loss!

- **Actively listen.** Give the talker your full attention—do not read, watch television, or let your mind wander and still expect to understand the message. Turn off or move away from other sounds in the area (e.g., mute or turn down the TV, don't have a conversation near a running appliance). Make sure you can see the talker's face.
- **Don't fake it.** Pretending like you heard something when you didn't is dangerous—you may agree to something you didn't want to, or you may be responsible for knowing something you don't! Instead, let the talker know you didn't hear and work towards clarifying. Say what you think you heard, as strange as it may sound to you. Ask questions to verify you heard the real message.
- **Let people know you have hearing loss.** Alerting them to your hearing loss allows them to use some of the above tips.
- **Become a coach.** Not everyone knows how to speak in a helpful manner, so give pointers (e.g., "I could understand you better if you could just speak a little slower."). People who hear normally have no idea what it's like to have hearing loss. Gently letting them know how they can do things differently can be very helpful.
- **Verify details.** Dates, times, events— details like these should be verified with the speaker to make sure they are being understood. Asking for information in writing is also very helpful.





**The Speaker.** Are you talking to someone who has hearing loss? If so, keep these pointers in mind. Effective speaking strategies can help get a message across and reduce a lot of frustration and/or uncomfortable moments:

- **Attention, attention!** Rule number one: get a person’s attention before you say anything! Remember, we hear with our brains. Unless we are ready to “receive” (listen to) a message, our brain is busy processing something else. Picture this: you wouldn’t throw a ball to someone and expect it to be caught if the person wasn’t ready to do so. You also wouldn’t throw a ball to someone who was in a different room. When we say something to someone while he/she is doing something else (even just thinking about something else), there’s a good chance we won’t be “heard.” Even if someone is wearing hearing aids—the hearing aids could be amplifying a voice perfectly, but the brain is focused on other signals being sent to it. So, Rule Number One with communication is to get someone’s attention—if necessary, wave or touch their arm—but don’t bother speaking until you know the person is listening!
- **Make your method of speaking “just right.”** Think “Goldilocks” when it comes to talking to someone with hearing loss: ensure your speech is not too fast, not too slow; not too loud, not too soft. Anything other than “just right” will distort sound and make it difficult to understand. Pausing at times will allow the person listening, who has to work harder than normal for reasons stated above, to “catch up” and rest.

- **Show your face.** The better your mouth and lips can be seen, the better you will be understood. Keep your hands (and any other object) away from your face. Believe it or not, facial hair can even make speech reading more difficult. Don’t talk through a yawn or while chewing gum. Don’t look away while talking – be careful of this especially when you are the passenger in a vehicle. Passengers have a tendency to look out the side window while talking, but doing so will make speech harder to understand.
- **Act it out.** Body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures—anything visual—can help convey your message.
- **Give a signal when changing subjects.** Just like using a turn signal when driving lets others know your intentions, giving a heads-up about a subject change can help a conversation flow. People with hearing loss piece together what they receive from their ears and what they know about a topic (i.e., they are filling in the blanks a lot of times). A quick subject change will be very confusing, so introducing a new topic is very helpful.





- **Rephrase rather than repeat.** When there is a misunderstanding, rephrase what you said rather than just repeating at a louder volume. Using a different combination of words (sounds) may be easier to understand.
- **Take turns.** In group settings, don't speak over each other—the statements will blend together and be impossible to interpret, hearing loss or not.
- **Write it down.** Specific pieces of information like addresses or meeting times should be given in writing. Numbers can be hard to understand because they sound so similar (15 and 16; 50 and 60), and context doesn't help the person figure out the meaning. Writing down key pieces of information can avoid confusion.
- **Don't talk around a person.** Talk directly to a person even if it means more work. Talking about someone as if he/she isn't there is rude and should be avoided.
- **Pay attention to body language.** People with hearing loss sometimes “fake it” to appear as though they are following what you are saying even when they are not. It's embarrassing and exhausting to keep asking for repeats. If the person looks a bit puzzled, tactfully ask if he or she understood you. Keep in mind that if someone isn't feeling well or is tired, understanding will be harder because of the extra work required to figure out what is being said.
- **When in doubt, ask.** If someone continues to have difficulty understanding you, ask if there is something you can do to make understanding easier. If the person tells you to slow down or speak louder, make every effort to do so. We tend to forget after a sentence or two and pick up our old habits.

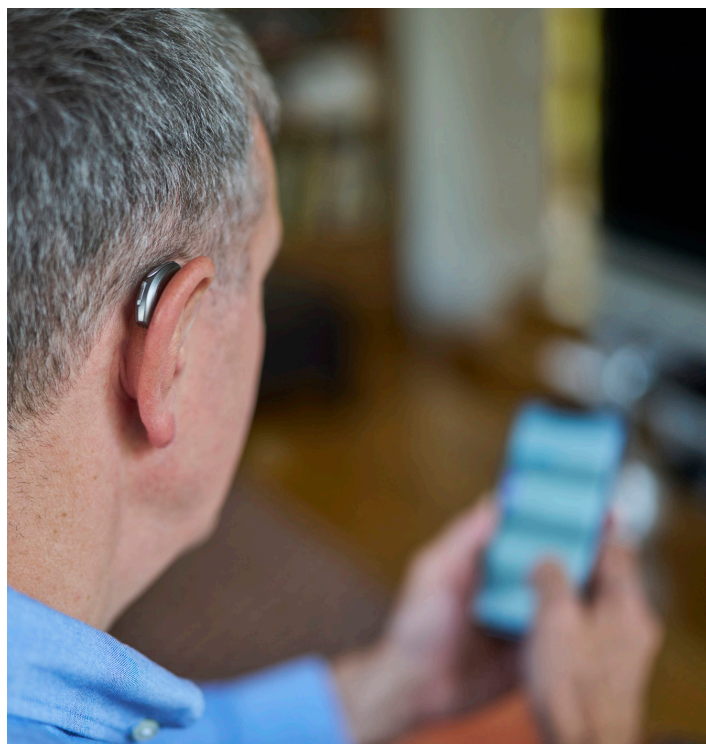
**The Environment.** DoThe setting of a conversation plays a large role in whether it's conducive for a good conversation. Whether you are talking or listening, keep in mind these suggestions to make the environment as ideal as possible for a conversation to take place.

- **Location, location, location.** The less sound has to travel, the better (louder, clearer) the signal. Be close to each other when talking. Also, be seen. People with hearing loss get a lot of help from visual information, so face each other directly—don't talk from another room or when someone has his/her back turned. Make sure everyone's face can be easily seen when it's a group conversation.
- **The quieter the environment, the better.** Think "library..." because speech is harder to distinguish when it blends with other sounds. Turn down, mute, or move away from things that are making noise (music, television, video games, running appliances, etc.). Close a door or a window to quiet outside sounds. Also remember that the loudest sound in the room "wins." For example, if you are running water at the sink, the sound of the water can drown out another voice in the room. Turn off the water to hear (or be heard) better.
- **Shed some light.** Faces are harder to see in dimly lit spaces or when bright light is coming from behind (e.g., someone sits in front of a window). For people with hearing loss, seeing the face of the talker can make the difference between understanding and confusion. Make sure faces are well-lit and easy to see, keeping lip movements, facial expressions, body language, and gestures in easy view. This visual information combined with what the ears (and hearing aids) send to the brain can really help with overall understanding.
- **Decorate your room for better hearing.** Sound can bounce around a lot in a room with hard surfaces, and echoes can create havoc on speech understanding. Rugs, drapes, upholstered furniture, table linens, and even fabric wall paper are all helpful in creating a space where listening is easiest. Hard surfaces like bare windows, higher ceilings, unupholstered furniture, etc. cause the room to be very reverberant, and that will make understanding much more challenging.



**Technology.** Modern hearing aids offer much more help than previous versions. Take advantage of these changes for all hearing losses, whether you select an over-the-counter device for a milder hearing loss or a professionally fit, prescription hearing aid. Accessories that work with hearing devices can really improve certain situations as well.

- **Wear your hearing aids!** Devices are only effective if properly maintained and worn. Wear your hearing aids all the time, even when you are by yourself and not listening to anyone talk. Doing so will keep your brain sharp and used to processing the sounds you wouldn't hear otherwise.
- **Use accessories to help maximize the help from hearing aids.** Hearing aids are an invaluable resource for people with hearing loss, but they can fall short in some places where there is noise, distance, poor room acoustics, etc. Accessories are available to help the hearing aids perform better in situations like these. One example is a remote microphone or FM system that sends the speaker's voice directly to the hearing aids, making the voice clearer and helping with understanding. Another common accessory is a TV streaming device which sends the audio signal from the TV directly to the hearing aid, clearing up dialogue significantly. Hearing aids can also be connected to smart phones to stream audio for phone calls and podcasts/music to the devices.
- **Turn on captioning. Utilize closed captioning on televisions—some do this just for movies to help with understanding.** Captioned telephones and apps are also available to help when listening on the phone. Having something visual (like text to read) will help with understanding.
- **Use real-time captioning through speech-to-text software and apps.** Apps like Live Transcribe can help convey a message in written form in real time during conversations, once again providing something visual.



## PRACTICE AND PATIENCE.

When we change how we have conversations, we can make communication much more pleasant for all involved. Since new habits don't form overnight, we will first have to remember the tips outlined in this piece, and then act on them. We will need to be patient with each other. Gentle reminders (and possibly the occasional laugh) will help us transition to making these habits our new "normal." Our efforts will pay off!

It's important to keep in mind that people who have difficulty hearing are not being difficult on purpose. They are trying to overcome an impairment and lead as normal of a life as possible, which includes having conversations in places where the environment makes it harder to hear. People who have normal hearing don't know what it's like to experience the frustration of hearing loss and may easily forget or abandon these better techniques as they get caught up in conversations. Conversation partners are "on the same team," however, and have a common goal of achieving successful communication to share ideas, nurture relationships, and have shared experiences in life. Resolving to work together and be patient with one another will enable our relationships with family, friends, professionals, and acquaintances to grow stronger. Applying these suggestions will help to break down that invisible wall that hearing loss creates between people and draw us closer together.



Dr. Heather Eck & Dr. Kerry Herrmann

## SERVING YOU

Our approach is centered on education so you can make the best decision for yourself. Our range of services include:

- Complimentary Screenings, Full Evaluations, and Medical Referrals (if indicated)
- Consultations with a discussion of various options
- New hearing aid purchases
- Adjustments to and servicing of current hearing aids
- Use of insurance benefits and discounted pricing

We offer you solutions and support your decision. We look forward to serving you.

## JOIN US ON A QUEST FOR BETTER HEARING, BETTER HEALTH, AND A BETTER LIFE.

We are accepting new patients by appointment, Monday - Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

If you would like to schedule an appointment for our services—from something as simple as a baseline, complimentary screening to having us take over your care or maximize the benefits of your current hearing aids—it starts with a simple phone call to **717.464.6411** for an appointment at either of our locations.

We look forward to meeting you!



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