

Education

The *Hidden Impact* of Hearing Loss

Cathy Kooser, MSW, LISW

Edited by Paula Bonillas

America is growing deafer by the minute amidst an increasingly noisy environment and the aging of the Baby Boomer population. Is it any wonder that “Huh?” is now one of our culture’s most popular words? However, in a society riddled with headline-grabbing news hearing loss takes a backseat in urgency and spending.

Despite the enormous psychosocial toll this disability takes not only on those who live with it but on our society as a whole, education and awareness are sorely overlooked. Hearing loss goes much deeper than simply the inability to hear; it affects our innermost being, self-perception and individuality.

By nature, humans seek relationships with other humans. Ineffective communication jeopardizes these relationships, threatening the very essence of our existence. Yet most people do not recognize how hearing loss affects them emotionally or the havoc it can wreak on relationships.

The connection between hearing loss and depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and even physical and mental exhaustion are often ignored. Frustration, anger, sadness and embarrassment are just a few of the negative emotions often shared by the person struggling to hear as well as the one struggling to be heard.

Lack of effective communication strategies only adds to the angst now endured by millions of people with hearing loss living in the United States. For example, simply asking, “huh?” or “what?” when we don’t understand is not a strategy. Bluffing, (pretending to understand when we do not), dominating the conversation or withdrawing are also not effective communication tools. The general lack of knowledge about what to do when misunderstandings arise is a primary deterrent to effectively coping with hearing loss, leaving millions of people mired in the above mentioned self-defeating behaviors that simply do not work, not for the hard-of-hearing person, their loved ones, co-workers nor the clerk at the grocery store.

Depression, although a normal stage in the grief process, often afflicts many people with hearing loss and becomes a problem. Professionals in the field tend to agree on three primary reasons for this:

1) **Exhaustion**. Because people with hearing loss are active rather than passive listeners, they must make a concerted effort to focus and pay attention in

order to understand. This high level of concentration is exhausting and leaves one prone to depression.

2) **Withdrawal**. When we isolate ourselves, relationships fail, and the exchange of thoughts and feelings is lost. Loneliness becomes a way of life and paves the way for depression.

3) **Grief**. Above and beyond the actual loss of hearing, relationships may falter (the divorce rate is higher for those with hearing loss); jobs may be lost – or one may be demoted or forced to retire early; music; events; laughter; even the loss of the sweet chirping of birds may be grieved. Self-esteem suffers, along with a sense of competency. Even the most independent person may be forced to cede their independence when communication difficulties arise.

Anxiety is another common problem facing those with hearing loss. Feeling a lack of control feeds anxiety. Worrying about the future, people with hearing loss fear being seen as foolish, unintelligent and/or incompetent. Even simple day-to-day communications can create high anxiety – at home, will the young mother with hearing loss understand her baby daughter, or hear her cry in the night? At work, will the supervisor's instructions be understood? Lying in a hospital bed awaiting surgery, will vital information be missed?

Anger, too, often accompanies hearing loss as a normal part of the grieving process. Anger becomes a problem when people become ensnared by it or by unwittingly taking out their anger on their loved ones with sarcasm, irritability, rudeness or worse. When used appropriately, anger can help the situation by signaling unmet needs or hurt feelings; however, learning to express anger constructively is a difficult emotional task.

Fear is also a constant in the lives of many people with hearing loss -- fear of becoming deaf, fear for physical safety and the ability to protect oneself and his or her loved ones, fear about functioning effectively in the world, fear that one's individuality has been lost or compromised. Fear, like ignorance, if left unchecked can paralyze, immobilize, and keep us locked in unproductive patterns of behavior.

When a person is depressed, anxious, angry, afraid, stressed out, physically exhausted, or even in pain, s/he focuses on those feelings, rather than upon listening. This creates a vicious cycle where anxiety about understanding a conversation detracts from the ability to focus on listening, so communication suffers. A misunderstanding occurs, and the anxiety is reinforced. Listening is a skill and requires maintenance. Frequent frustration during communication can lead to a pattern of giving up, further undermining the ability to listen.

Multi-tasking is almost impossible for the hard-of-hearing person if it involves listening. Cooking dinner and carrying on a conversation with a child

simultaneously may be tantamount to asking a person in a wheelchair to scale the stairs. Tasks must be halted in order to focus completely on the conversation. At times sentences must be pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle, so responses may be appropriate one moment and then completely out of the ballpark the next.

Piecing together sentences slows down communication whether at home or in the workplace, leaving the hard-of-hearing person feeling inadequate and often leading others to draw negative, incorrect impressions. Without revealing the nature of one's hearing loss and the special needs inherent, others are left pondering the odd communication patterns and may conclude that s/he is dealing with someone who is unintelligent, slow-thinking, snobbish or rude. Upfront honesty about one's loss will usually allay such characterizations.

Self-esteem can be significantly impacted by the inability to hear. Slower processing, inappropriate and/or lack of responses, a reduced sense of competency, bluffing and dependency upon others, contribute to a sense of being broken and a low sense of self.

People with hearing loss often become too dependent on their loved ones, friends or co-workers to help them communicate, especially if they tend toward passive communication behavior. Lack of awareness can also foster dependencies because those involved are not aware of more productive coping and communication strategies. Although relying on others is appropriate sometimes, this should be done only when absolutely necessary; asking loved ones to act as interpreters frequently can strain relationships.

The need for assertiveness cannot be stressed enough, yet only a small percentage of the hearing-impaired population can assertively convey their unique communication needs. Getting those needs met is critical, but ineffectual methods such as manipulation, passive, passive-aggressive or aggressive forms of communication behavior often replace more reasonable methods.

Generally, people tend to ignore their hearing loss for anywhere from five to 10 years because the brain habituates to gradual loss and people simply don't realize they are not hearing as well as they used to. Loved ones tend to notice first, but when this is called to the attention of the hearing-impaired person, s/he usually will deny the existence of a problem, tossing such observations back with complaints of their own. "You're mumbling," they might say, or "you talk too fast," or they may complain that the environment is too loud. Such denial and often thereafter, accompanying resistance, is another major deterrent to dealing effectively with hearing loss.

As with any difficult life circumstance, perception is key. Is it a problem that come be overcome? Is it insurmountable? Is the glass half full, or half empty?

Believing in our ability to overcome an obstacle is a must. A positive attitude is vital.

What ingredients are needed in order to live a happy, productive life with hearing loss?

1) **Positive attitude**. One must believe s/he can handle any given situation effectively in order to do so. People with negative attitudes are more inclined to struggle with hearing loss, but even these people have the power to change their attitude. It takes hard work, but it can be done.

2) **Education**. Understanding how hearing loss impacts one's life and what strategies are needed in order to deal effectively are critical.

- * Learn how hearing loss impacts communication.

- * Get the scoop on assistive listening and adaptive devices (including hearing aids).

- * Practice effective communication and assertiveness.

- * Gain knowledge about the impact of hearing loss on emotional and physical wellbeing and relationships.

3) **Take responsibility**. Be open and honest about hearing loss, even if this means making personal change. Shed the victim mentality. We give away our power when we expect others to change instead of changing ourselves. Taking risks improves one's life. Using new modes of communication and applying new information are essential to improving communication.

4) **Practice healthy living habits**. Getting enough sleep at night and taking frequent breaks throughout the day can significantly reduce exhaustion. Simple techniques can work wonders for reducing anxiety, depression and stress: eating correctly, exercising, relaxation, hobbies, journaling, pets, prayer, and the list goes on.

5) **Consult with a variety of professionals**. Talk to others who share this problem; find out the latest in technology. Find ways to reduce anxiety and what communication techniques work best – and make sure you convey these techniques to those with whom you communicate. If necessary, seek professional help to work through the anger and grief that often accompany hearing loss.

You **can** come to acceptance of your hearing loss, where you consider it simply a part of yourself -- just like your hair and eye color, the shape of your body -- it becomes part of your physical being, a part of **you**. Painful situations are always difficult to embrace, yet difficult life circumstances allow us the opportunity to become greater human beings – fuller, richer, with more to offer others. It's important to embrace all that life has to offer you, both the pain and the joy. Remember – there is a silver lining in every dark, gloomy cloud. Look for

the silver lining, look for the lesson waiting to unfold, look for the blessing, because there always is one!

Cathy Kooser

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Hearing Loss is not just About Me!

Cathy Kooser, MSW, LISW

My hearing loss is not just about me. Everyone around me is deeply impacted by my inability to hear -- especially those who are closest to me. It's imperative I understand how my spouse and family interpret my coping strategies.

I used to think I was the only one impacted by my hearing loss, I was the only one in pain; however, I was wrong. I was so focused on my own struggles with communicating it never occurred to me to consider my loved ones. I've come to realize many of those around me struggle emotionally with my inability to hear and appropriately respond or participate. The truth is they experience many of the same emotions I do, in particular frustration, anger, and sadness. They may also feel lonely, isolated and even *unloved*.

I believe life is all about relationships and learning how to give and receive love, but let's face it -- relationships are *hard*! Even under the *best* of circumstances relationships take a lot of hard work, time, and commitment. Certainly effective communication is a critical component in relationships in order to understand and be understood. One of the single greatest needs any human being has is the need to be understood. Hearing loss can significantly compromise the ability to communicate effectively; therefore feeling

misunderstood, rather than understood is often the outcome. A lack of communication and/or a breakdown in communication may come with a heavy price to pay relationally.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

It's been my experience frequent misunderstandings occur and inaccurate and negative perceptions are often formed *about* me, by those *around* me. How and why does this happen? Because my hearing loss was very slow and gradual I began to use maladaptive coping strategies without realizing it as a way to compensate when I didn't understand. While I don't recommend them, there are three primary coping strategies I've adopted and I bet if you examine your own coping behavior, you'll find yourself using these strategies too!

Bluffing

The first strategy I use is bluffing. I use bluffing a lot – you know, when I smile and nod and shake my head that I understand, and I don't have a clue. Sometimes I just get tired of having to ask people to repeat or I'm afraid I'll make them angry if I do. I usually ask for repetition twice, but if I still don't understand, I bluff.

Oh my goodness, have I ever put my foot in my mouth using this strategy. I can't tell you how many times my children have told me "mom I told you....." and I had no knowledge of the matter. I've also made numerous mistakes because I bluffed, rather than owning up to the truth and my lack of understanding. When I really think about it, I realize bluffing is not honest. I lead people to believe I know exactly what they're saying when I don't. Trust, an element that is absolutely crucial to loving relationships, can be broken down and lost when bluffing is a consistent strategy used, as trust is maintained in part, through honest communication.

Dominating the Conversation

The second maladaptive strategy I use is dominating the conversation. If I'm talking all the time, I'm in control of the situation and I know exactly what's being said. I'll never forget when my sweetheart recently told me I dominate on the phone. I was shocked! After pondering his statement I realized he was right. I can't see his face; therefore I don't know he has something to say, so I jump in to fill the silence. I mean after all, there's not supposed to be silence on the phone.

I know the tendency to dominate can be interpreted as disrespectful, aggressive, controlling, domineering and self-centered behavior. I'm sure I've been perceived as a "know it all." When I dominate I lose out on the opportunity to learn and the relationship really is no relationship at all, as it's very one-sided. Personally I tend to avoid people who dominate – how about you?

Withdrawal

The third maladaptive strategy I've used and I believe the one most devastating of all, is my tendency to withdraw. Of course I can withdraw in a room full of people. I often withdraw at family gatherings. How do I withdraw, by staying busy – cooking, doing dishes, cleaning up, etc. My daughter once asked me, "Mom, why don't you just sit down with us and enjoy this time with your children and grandchildren?" Well, I want to, but it's hard. Two close family members mumble, my grandchildren are young and very difficult to understand and then of course there's the noise factor. You get the idea.

But honestly, what is their interpretation of my withdrawal? What if it makes them feel as if they are not important to me, that I'm angry with them or worse yet, I don't love them? Please hear me, (no pun intended), when we withdraw there is no relationship, but rather isolation for us *and* them. I ask you, is it fair to impose isolation on them? Consider also the loss of opportunity to teach and be taught. Our children and grandchildren need us and the wisdom we can invest in their lives. Not to mention, you've heard it said, our children and grandchildren are often *our* greatest teachers! *Most importantly of all*, the opportunity is lost to give and receive love. Love truly is what makes the world go around and certainly is the most vital ingredient in any familial relationship!

My daughter had a baby last fall. I was in the hospital room with her and her husband, my son and his wife. Everyone was happy, chatting and celebrating the life of our new family member. *I didn't understand a word they were saying*, in spite of attempts at effective communication. I later told my sweetheart, "I'll be so glad when I go to heaven and I can hear every word spoken." While I had not withdrawn, I certainly felt isolated and apart from my family and the celebration that was taking place. I was deeply saddened. While I never shared my lack of understanding with them, I'm sure *they* would have been deeply saddened too.

More Communication Problems

Not responding appropriately when spoken to or not responding at all can also cause misunderstandings to occur, leading to inaccurate perceptions. I'm sure many an argument has occurred because I responded inappropriately. I thought they said one thing, in actuality they said something different and that's all it took for world war three to erupt! When a loved one speaks to me and I don't respond at all they may feel ignored, unimportant and unloved; when the simple truth is, I didn't hear them.

Selective Hearing

Of course there's also the issue of "selective hearing." I hear when I want to hear. I wish I could have a dollar for every time I've heard that! There are so many variables that go into hearing it's hard for people with normal hearing to understand why sometimes I get it and sometimes I don't! There are actually about 50 different factors related to the speaker, the listener and the environment that influence my ability to understand. YES, I publicly admit, I have selective hearing, as I'm an active listener and I have to make the choice to pay attention in order to understand.

My Family's Perception

Ahhhh, how sweet it is – using these maladaptive coping strategies is so much easier than struggling to listen and understand and that's why I use them. Or is it really easier? Maybe it just seems so because I'm not sure what to do instead? One thing I have learned the hard way is the use of these strategies can have a devastating impact on those closest to me, because they often interpret my use of them as something negative about *them* rather than *my* own struggle to hear and understand.

It's human nature to think about myself first before thinking of others. Therefore it's not surprising when my son interprets my lack of response as ignoring him, further deducing he's not important to me, instead of realizing a communication breakdown occurred. It's also important to remember hearing loss is invisible – my son does not have a constant visual reminder of my hearing loss and the resulting communication breakdown that often occurs, which further complicates the situation.

Sadly what really happens is often my loved ones internalize my maladaptive coping strategies as a statement about who they are and what they mean to me. *Aside from God, no one or no thing is more important to me than my loved ones.* It's crucial I understand how they perceive my maladaptive coping strategies and seek to make use of more effective ones. For what began as sweet – the easier way to cope – turns ripe and sour all too quickly!!!

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