

It Takes Two, Baby!

By Dr. Noël Crosby, Au.D.

In the 1966 Motown hit duet, It Takes Two, Marvin Gaye and Kim Weston sing of all the many things in life that are better with two people instead of one. The same is true when it comes to communicating effectively. To be successful, the speaker and the listener must follow strategic guidelines to maximize understanding.

The person with hearing loss does not suffer alone. Family and friends experience frustration and impatience as a result of communication breakdown. The communication strategies outlined below go a long way to reduce many of these common communication difficulties.

Communication strategies for speaking to the hearing impaired:

1. Is your listener paying attention?

Make sure you have the attention of the hearing impaired person before you begin to speak. The most effective way to do this is to call the person's name and wait until they respond to initiate communication.

2. Consider the obvious. If you are speaking to someone who wears hearing aids, uses an assistive listening device or who

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Dr. Noël Crosby, Au.D.

tells you he has difficulty hearing: slow down! Speak clearly and just a little louder without dropping the volume at the end of a sentence. Do not shout or over-enunciate your words.

3. Be aware of your environment.

Is there distracting background noise? Does the room echo? Is there enough lighting for the hearing impaired person to see your face when you talk?

4. Help the hearing impaired person "listen with their eyes."

Face the person at all times. Do not talk with anything in your mouth. Keep your hands and other objects away from your mouth.

5. A positive attitude gets results.

Remain patient. Never talk about the hearing impaired person in his presence...as if he or she cannot hear. Ask what you can do to assist communication.

6. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. If something you say is not understood, don't just repeat it again. Instead try rephrasing the message using different words.

Communication strategies for the hearing impaired listener:

1. Get motivated! The more motivated you are to improve your hearing, the more willing you are to wear your hearing aids or use an assistive listening device. In addition, motivation brings with it an openness to change. Out of that openness comes a willingness to discuss your feelings about your hearing loss and to explore new solutions (like LACE, the unique Listening And Communication Enhancement software featured as part of this article!)

2. Don't deny that you have a hearing loss. Denial of your hearing loss will only make things worse. Notify the speaker of your hearing difficulties and suggest ways to improve your ability to understand.

3. Face the speaker. Speech reading skills will develop more quickly if you focus on facing the speaker during communication. Watch the speaker's mouth and try to focus on the topic of conversation, even if you think you are missing a lot.

4. Make eye contact. Communication improves when you combine listening with looking. Take note of gestures, facial expressions and body language to help with understanding.

5. Don't be a pretender. Pretending you understand when you don't will only exacerbate the problem. Nothing draws attention to the fact that you have a hearing loss than laughing in the wrong places or answering a question you didn't understand.

7. Confirm for understanding. If you think you have missed part of the conversation, ask for it to be repeated. To help with the flow of the dialogue, repeat the portion of the conversation you did understand.

8. Be aware of your surroundings. Can you position yourself to see the faces of the speaker? Is there distracting background noise? Is the room reverberant?

9. Be specific with your requests for help. If the speaker is talking too rapidly, request that he slow down. If the speaker is speaking too softly, request that he speak louder. If the speaker covers his mouth with a hand or paper, request that he remove it. If the speaker turns away from you while speaking, request that he face you.

10. Be patient. If you are patient, the speaker will be more likely to be patient as well.

"It takes two" hearing aids too!

Not only does "it take two" to improve communication, but studies show wearing two hearing aids has many benefits. According to Sergei Kochkin, Ph. D. President of the Better Hearing Institute in Alexandria, VA, "it is important that the person with the hearing loss be given the chance to experience binaural (two hearing aids) amplification if they

they have hearing loss in both ears before a decision on [wearing] one or two hearing aids is made. Similar to the way refractory problems in both eyes are treated with a pair of glasses, it makes sense that bilateral hearing loss should be treated with binaural hearing aids."

Kotchkin lists many benefits of binaural hearing at the Better Hearing Institute website at www.bhi.org, some of which are listed below:

1. Those who wear two hearing aids routinely understand speech and conversation significantly better than people who wear one hearing aid. Additionally, speech understanding is improved in difficult listening environments.

2. Sound quality improves when wearing hearing aids binaurally because the hearing range increases from 180 degrees to 360 degrees.

3. Wearing two hearing aids generally requires less volume than one, reducing distortion and resulting in better reproduction of amplified sounds.

4. Often, with just one hearing aid, many noises and words sound alike. But with two hearing aids, sounds are more easily distinguishable. The origin of the sound is also more easily determined.

5. Research has shown that when one hearing aid is worn, the unaided ear tends to lose its ability to hear and understand. Wearing two hearing aids keeps both ears active.

6. Hearing is less tiring and listening more pleasant because binaural wearers do not have to strain to hear with the better ear.

7. Two-eared hearing results in a feeling of balanced reception of sound whereas monaural hearing creates an unusual feeling of sounds being heard in one ear.

8. A lower volume control setting is required with two hearing aids than is required with one hearing aid. The result is a better tolerance of loud sounds and reduced chances of feedback.

9. About 50% of tinnitus (ringing in the ears) sufferers report improvement when wearing hearing aids. If a person with tinnitus wears a hearing aid in only one ear, there will still be ringing in the ear that does not have a hearing aid.

10. An overwhelming majority of hearing aid users with hearing loss in both ears choose two hearing aids over one, when given the choice to hear binaurally. A survey of over 5,000 consumers with hearing loss in both ears indicates that binaurally fit wearers are more satisfied than those fit with one hearing aid.