

Hearing Loss Affects the Entire Family

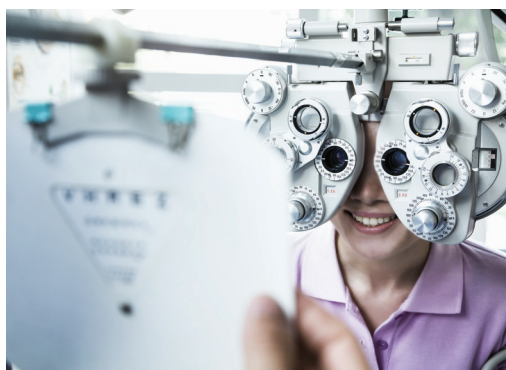
"I cannot understand what you are saying when you speak to me from another room." The words floated up the stairs and stopped me in my tracks. Hearing those words, which I have spoken thousands of times, coming patiently from my 14-year-old son's mouth, made me wince.

I recognized those were my words. They were ones I'd said to him over and over for years. I had thoughtlessly made the mistake my family members so often make – speaking to someone in another room and expecting them to understand what was said. I felt embarrassed and humbled about my flippant error, but at the same time proud about the way he handled it. It was exactly the way I'd modeled it for my family so many times.

I've had significant hearing loss for almost two decades and I'm a licensed hearing care professional. I'm also the daughter of a person with significant hearing loss. I eat, breathe, work and sleep hearing loss and adaptive communication strategies. Of course, I know better than to talk to someone when they're in another room, whether they have hearing loss or not. But I had done it anyway.

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How Hearing Loss is Different than Losing Your Vision



It's a common misconception. If you can buy a pair of readers from the drugstore for your vision, why can't it be that simple for your hearing? Truth be told, although hearing and vision are both senses, that's where the similarity ends. In other words, losing your hearing is much different than losing your vision — and here are the reasons why.

Correcting hearing loss is more complex

Vision loss can often be corrected to a normal level with eyeglasses while hearing devices cannot restore hearing to normal.

In other words, you can't expect to have "20/20" hearing from wearing hearing aids like you can with your vision from wearing eyeglasses.

According to the CDC, refractive disorders — such as nearsightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism — are the most frequent eye problems in the United States, affecting as many as 11 million Americans aged 12 years and older. The good news? In these cases, eyesight can be corrected back to normal vision with the correct prescription eyeglasses, contact lenses or corrective eye surgery.

As for your hearing, although hearing device technology has improved substantially in the last 10 years, hearing aids can't repair the damage to the hair cells of the inner ear. These hair cells do not regenerate, so when they die or are damaged, the brain has a harder time interpreting the signals they send. Hearing devices are great at amplifying the sound coming into your auditory system; however, it is inherently more difficult for them to pick out the signal of interest than it is for your brain. Digital hearing aids have made great strides in this area — hearing aids today are very good at processing complex sounds to pick out the useful signals. Unfortunately, the average person waits several years to get their first hearing aids, reducing the stimulation of the auditory portion of the brain during this time. When the hearing aids are finally fitted, the first time user often needs to retrain the brain to grow accustomed to the wide range of sound stimulation again.

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Practicing communication skills

As human beings, we tend to get lazy with communication. This is especially true in families. We're often more casual in communication with our close loved ones than we are at work or in social settings. Even when we know better, we still sometimes speak when facing away from the person we're talking to, call out to someone in another room or otherwise flub an opportunity to be heard. It isn't purposeful. It's not carefully planned to make the other person feel slighted. It's just being normal humans, making common mistakes. The failure to communicate effectively can create relationship stress we just don't need or want in our lives.

Anyone can have trouble understanding spoken words – even people with normal hearing or those who compensate for hearing loss with hearing aids. This can have serious and far-reaching effects on any family. In my own family, I've tried to teach the kids to avoid saying "What?" when they don't understand someone. Instead, we say, "I don't understand what you are saying," and give the speaker an opportunity to change something in their delivery so they can be understood.

Hearing loss in families is sometimes untreated

I straddle both sides of this equation. I have hearing loss myself and I wear fantastic hearing aids. I'm also the daughter of a person with significant hearing loss who also has excellent hearing aids but frequently chooses not to wear them. I text my mother before going to her house to remind her to put in her hearing aids. Often she does and she can hear and converse with us right away when we walk in. When that happens, life is good.

Other times, though, my mother doesn't put in her hearing aids for our visit and she cannot understand a word we say. This doesn't stop her from asking questions, repeatedly, to which she cannot understand the answers. I keep a handwritten note in my purse that says "Mom, I will talk with you after you put in your hearing aids."

There's no question – when a family member has a hearing loss, treated or untreated, the loss impacts the entire family. Even when using hearing aids, most people with hearing loss still struggle to understand speech in challenging listening conditions. What should you do? First, encourage your loved

one to see a hearing care professional for treatment. Second, lay some ground rules for communication.

Two simple rules for family communication

Family communication is vital, whether hearing loss affects the family or not. Sure, we all get lazy and we all make mistakes. It's also ridiculous to think someone with perfect hearing is going to understand you when they're on another floor of the home, you have your face stuck in a cupboard, they are walking away or there is background noise. So I strive to make clear communication a priority.

As a person with hearing loss, I've spent years trying to model these two rules:

1. If you are the speaker, it's your job to be sure what you're saying is being heard and understood. If it isn't, you need to fix it.
2. If you are the listener, it's your job to let the speaker know whether you've heard and understood.

Be nice to each other

When your family member has hearing loss, you may encounter the frustration of repeating yourself, the feeling of being ignored and separation from the relationship. The most important communication rule in my family is to be forgiving when someone makes a mistake, because no one is perfect. Be calm, even when patience is wearing thin. No one is at fault here. Communication is what makes us human, and with that sometimes comes communication mishaps. The sooner we develop an attitude of acceptance, the smoother it will go.



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How Hearing Loss is Different than Losing Your Vision *Continued...*

The auditory system is more difficult to access

Eye surgery can correct a variety of vision problems while most hearing loss cannot be surgically corrected. Modern medical science has discovered how to replace and reshape the lens of the eye to correct problems such as nearsightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism. Additionally, cataracts, which are the leading cause of vision loss in the United States, can be surgically removed. The CDC estimates 20.5 million Americans age 40 and older have cataract in one or both eyes and 6.1 million have had their lens surgically removed. Photorefractive keratectomy (PRK) surgery corrects myopia and laser in situ keratomileusis (LASIK) surgery corrects those who are either nearsighted or farsighted. All of this is made possible by the surgeon's easy physical access to the eyes.

Those with conductive hearing loss may be able to have their hearing restored, as this condition is typically associated with an obstruction in the ear — such as excess earwax, an ear infection or damage to the bones of the middle ear. Unfortunately, it's not the same for those with sensorineural hearing loss, which accounts for as much as 90 percent of all hearing loss. Those with this type of hearing loss have damage to the inner ear or the nerve that runs from the ear to the brain, or even the brain itself. The location of the inner ear, deep within the temporal bone, makes it difficult to access the structure for repair, even if we could repair or regrow those delicate hair cells of the inner ear.

Here's the bottom line

Both your vision and your hearing are important senses which should be evaluated on a regular basis. According to an article on vision loss on MedicineNet.com, nearly half of Americans worry more about going blind than losing their memory or their ability to walk or hear, yet 12.2 million adults who require vision correction don't use any. And 48 percent of parents with children under 12 have never taken their child to an eye care professional.

The statistics aren't much better when it comes to hearing. Research indicates the average person diagnosed with hearing loss waits an average of seven to 10 years before seeking treatment. During that time, other medical and social problems such as an increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and dementia as well as anxiety, depression and social isolation can result.

Eye care professionals recommend adults have their vision tested every two years, while hearing healthcare professionals recommend having a baseline hearing test at age 50, with follow up exams annually after the age of 55. Naturally, if you experience any difficulty with either your vision or hearing, you should seek medical treatment immediately.



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Special Offer Inside!

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- What's New? Rechargeable Phonak Audéo B-R Hearing Aids



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What's New? Rechargeable Phonak Audéo B-R Hearing Aids



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fidence of knowing that your Phonak rechargeable hearing aids are conveniently charged and ready to take you through long days...and nights, if necessary.

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