



# Dealing with **Hearing Loss**

By Lisa Evans

**I**magine trying to have a conversation and constantly having to ask your companions to repeat themselves; or not being able to participate in a group discussion in the common room because the TV is on and six people are chatting around you. Sadly, this is the harsh reality of many seniors.

According to the Hearing Loss Association of America, one in three individuals at the age of 65 will suffer from hearing loss. Hearing loss is identified as the third most prevalent chronic disability among older adults, behind arthritis and hypertension, and affects over 36 million Americans. Not only is hearing loss a physical limitation, it can also be a serious lifestyle impediment, leading to withdrawal from friends, family and social situations.

A disability that often goes unnoticed, hearing loss associated with aging can be such a gradual process that it can be difficult for caregivers to notice the symptoms. Some basic warning signs include: speaking louder than necessary, constantly asking to repeat in conversation, withdrawing from social contact, speech that seems muffled or slurred, and difficulty understanding someone speaking from a distance or conversing in areas with background noise.

Seniors suffering from hearing loss have difficulty communicating in noisy situations, in large groups and at a distance. They may have trouble hearing the radio, television or telephone. While hearing aids can help to improve patient's communication abilities, these problems are likely to remain unrectified, even with a hearing aid, since hearing aids work best in quiet environments with a limited number of communication partners.

The environment and the speaker can either assist or hinder someone with hearing difficulties. Here are some ideas for caregivers to improve communication with seniors suffering from hearing loss:

## **1** Change the Environment

Noisy environments are an albatross for people suffering with hearing loss. Multiple conversations, background

noise from heating and cooling vents, fans, running water, television and traffic can hinder an individual from hearing even a face-to-face conversation. Being aware of physical surroundings and trying to move away or remove these sources of noise when communicating with someone who suffers from hearing loss can greatly assist them.

Rooms with echoes, such as gymnasiums, are a challenge to someone who is hard of hearing. Choose small rooms with carpets, drapes and soft furnishings to minimize the echo, and turn off any distractions such as the television or radio.

## **2** Grab Attention

When speaking to someone who suffers from hearing loss, it is important to get their attention before you speak by saying their name or tapping gently on their arm. Always face the person when speaking. Don't cover your mouth or speak with something in your mouth, such as gum or food.

## **3** Don't Change Speaking Tone

Speak in a normal tone, not raising your voice unless you are asked to. While the first response of most individuals is to shout to someone with hearing issues, shouting can distort the sound of the voice, making it even more difficult to understand. Speak clearly and at a moderate pace. If you are not understood, simplify the message; say it in a different way or write it down.

## **4** Individual vs. Group Setting

One-to-one communication is easier for someone suffering from hearing loss. Physical distance between the speaker and listener can be challenging for someone who is hard of hearing. The distance should be no more than six feet to allow the speaker to be both seen and heard.

Using these strategies, caregivers can help eliminate some of the most common issues that exacerbate insecurities of seniors with hearing loss.

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