

Myths about people with hearing loss....The Rest of the Story for Hearing People

There are a number of misconceptions about people who don't hear well. Most of these come from hearing people not understanding what it is like not to hear or hear clearly and jumping to an erroneous conclusion about our behavior. The other side of the coin is many of us with less than good hearing aren't comfortable with discussing our hearing loss and don't inform others what is needed to help communication.

Losing one's hearing distances a person from other people, which makes not being able to follow a conversation or misinterpreting information the rule, not the exception. Not hearing well makes people apprehensive about communicating. Feeling isolated from people added to the embarrassment of needing to ask that parts of a conversation be repeated, along with misunderstanding what is said and fear of appearing foolish commonly results in anxiety, depression, loneliness, anger and frustration.

The following will provide hearing people with some idea of what may lie behind the behavior or appearance of people who don't hear well. Of course we are individuals and will respond somewhat differently to our hearing loss; nevertheless, understanding what may lie behind some of the stereotypes attributed to us as a group, is helpful. Insight into what may be going on behind the scenes is part of what constitutes "The Rest of the Story"

Well a person doesn't hear well we are often are told: "You hear what you want to hear". These words are hurtful and can make us frustrated and angry. We want to hear you. Since hearing properly is dependent on many factors such as, distance from the speaker, background noise, pitch, volume and quality of the speaker's voice, as well as the choice of words used by the speaker, our fatigue level etc. it may appear we are deliberately ignoring the speaker. The comment "we hear what we want to hear" hurts because we are unable to explain why we may have heard you one time and not heard you or didn't understand you another time. The reason we didn't hear you may be a mystery to us as well. All we know is either our ears failed us, or our brains could not process the information as it was presented. When it comes down to it we'd certainly rather hear then not!

"If you paid attention you'd hear me" What the speaker is really saying is that if we just "paid attention" our hearing problem would somehow go away. How wonderful if it were that simple. Hearing is not passive for people who can't hear well, it's hard work and requires constant vigilance. Listening can be exhausting. No one can maintain a constant state of alertness at all times, especially when tired, ill, or deep in thought. When our eyes and minds need a rest we may not hear or understand you because of listening fatigue. It's not an intentional slight.

People who have hearing problems are "standoffish", unfriendly, antisocial, or "pushy".

When a person has a hearing loss often it becomes difficult to keep track of a conversation well and we may not be able to participate as a result. We may also be unsure of what's going on and don't want to look foolish, so we may avoid, withdraw or "clam up" during social situations. If we withdraw or don't participate in a conversation our facial expression may not be expressing comfort or joy, but stress or annoyance, probably with ourselves. We may show what we're feeling which can be anything from sad to angry, or "absent". We may appear unapproachable or unfriendly, because we are "lost" in the conversation. We may interrupt because we didn't realize someone else was speaking, in that case we may seem pushy or rude.

People who can't hear talk too much. Although this may appear to contradict the "standoffish" appearance mentioned above, constant talking might be another means of handling poor hearing. If a person is speaking they know what the conversation is about which eliminates the stress of hearing. In addition the more a person talks the less they have to listen. Certainly, not everyone who talks a lot is has a hearing problem and the reverse is true, but talking a lot may be a coping mechanism for some people.

People with poor hearing are annoying to be around because they need everything repeated. Alas to some extent this may be true. Because conversation moves very quickly any delays are annoying to hearing people, and repeating definitely causes a delay.

If information is not heard clearly we may not quite "get it" or we may realize what we heard didn't make sense so we need clarification. Be sure you have our attention before you speak. If you are a normally hearing person repeat your word or comment once if that doesn't work then use another word or rephrase your statement. Don't be shy about using facial expressions, gestures or moving to a quieter location if needed, that's what we do among ourselves.

People with a hearing loss know sign language and reads lips. Unlike deaf people most people with hearing loss do not use sign language. We may have learned some sign along the way but we use oral English, therefore an interpreter is not generally appropriate. Learning the manual alphabet and a few signs often will help in family conversations. Remember encouraging the person with the hearing loss to learn to sign won't be helpful if others in their immediate living situation don't learn as well. Those of us with a hearing loss do use assistive listening devices and systems. Inviting us to an event at a venue, which has an induction loop, FM or IR system allows us to fully enjoy the event and is greatly appreciated.

Lip reading (speech reading) is to a great extent, an inherent skill. It may be honed by taking classes but studies show many people whether hearing, hard of hearing or deaf either have a facility for it, or they don't. Watching a person who is speaking provides many clues no matter what the hearing status of an individual. Whereas viewing the speaker may be optional for a hearing person, for the hard of hearing person it is imperative. Our lip/speech reading ability may differ but we all need to use the skills we do have to understand what we're hearing.

You have hearing aids and you still can't hear! I have glasses and I can see, there must be something wrong. Maybe you need better hearing aids.

Glasses correct vision. Hearing aids and cochlear implants do not correct hearing. Hearing aids increase volume (loudness) but do not significantly improve clarity or the ability to understand speech very well, especially in noisy situations. Nothing makes abnormal hearing "normal". Hearing aids are a needed assist to hearing but do not ensure we'll be able to hear or understand a conversation. Cochlear implants are lifesavers for people whose hearing loss is no longer helped by hearing aids, however they also don't make hearing normal.

When people with hearing loss miss something, it's okay to say "It's not important" or "I'll tell you later."

These comments are truly frustrating to us for three reasons. First the person who was asked for the information has determined the information is not important rather than allowing us, to make that determination. Secondly we usually receive an edited version of a conversation and thirdly the "later" in "I'll tell you later" never seems to arrive. We know you can't repeat everything that is said, and sometimes it can be disruptive to tell us word for word what is being said. A synopsis is not perfect but it will do, as will writing down the most helpful information. If you say "I'll tell you later"...please do!

The person with hearing loss isn't mentally competent:

This presumption can be the most damaging to a person who is older or living in a residential setting. When a person doesn't hear well their brain fills in the blanks, often with incorrect or even comical information. The result may be an answer which seems inappropriate or strange. Sometimes people are not aware someone is speaking to them and they are feeling isolated, almost like living in a glass house. To a hearing person these reactions may appear that the person with a hearing loss has a mental problem, which in fact it's a problem of auditory isolation. It may take some time to "get through" to someone under this circumstance. Once it's appreciated the individual needs hearing assistance or perhaps just isn't wearing their aids, you may see the person come to life.

So now you know the "Rest of the Story". We hope the information is helpful. If you are unsure how to communicate with someone you know doesn't hear well, ask. Most of us can tell you what will be helpful in making communication easier for everyone. There is no perfect "fix" which will resolve all difficulties we encounter that's the nature of a hearing loss. If those of us who don't hear well do what we can to help ourselves, and hearing people do what they can to help as well, many barriers will be lowered and frustration greatly lessened....that too is part of "The Rest of the Story".