

Easy Entertaining For People With Hearing Loss

By Meredith Low*

Make calculated and smart choices to help reduce or eliminate stress before, during and after you host a party. The results can be a good time while you enjoy entertaining others.

If you're a social person with a hearing loss, communicating with others in their homes or in restaurants may be stressful and tiring for you. My idea of a living nightmare is finding myself at a party I must attend in a crowded, dark, noisy restaurant with exposed brick or cement block walls and bare floors. Communication would be hopelessly obscured thanks to my inability to comprehend speech through a wall of noise. Trying to lip read and understand facial expressions in near-total darkness in restaurants rates high on my list of anxiety-provoking activities. Would this situation present you with similar difficulties?

The Benefits of Staying Home

Some time ago, I had an epiphany during one of my home parties. I could understand much more of the conversation at home than I could in a restaurant, and I was relaxed and having a good time!

At home, you call the shots. You can limit invitations to the number of persons you can comfortably interact with. You can decide whether you prefer to serve food buffet-style, or to serve a full-course sit-down dinner. Think of parties you've attended in the past and try to recall which approach was best suited to your communication needs, or at least left you feeling less tense and conflicted.

Throwing a party at your place, whether it's simple or wildly grand, puts you in the driver's seat in many ways. There are some choices that are yours to make.

You Have Choices

Shall I Play Music? If yes, decide in advance what type of music will be played and at what volume.

Guests

Communication is optimal with fewer guests. Invite a reasonable number of people well ahead of the party date. If there are cancellations, you can invite others. If the party is dictated by another event, such as a family wedding or funeral, reducing the number of people at your event, there will be other opportunities. Attendance will not always be under your control.

Seating Arrangements, Atmosphere, Lighting and More

- Buffet Style: You might prefer this if you're most comfortable "visiting" your guests wherever they choose to sit. You can set up tray tables or not; if so, place them to your communication advantage. Choose which rooms in your home are okay for eating and entertaining. A large room with plenty of space for people to spread out and eat is ideal!
- Sit-down Meal Choices: seat those whose speech you comprehend most easily nearest you. Arrange place cards with guests' names on the table.
- A round or oval table will make it easier for you to see all your guests at once. Or you can seat your guests at a small, square table such as a card table, which will bring your company closer to you. That can help you understand the conversation better. (Politely request that only one person talk at a time.) For more people, add extra card tables if space permits.
- Be sure your centerpieces or candles, if you have them, are relatively low, so you can see everyone's face.
- Put your FM microphone(if you use one) on a throne or riser in the middle of the table, safely bordered on all sides. And finally, if someone offers to loan you a portable loop to make your party more hearing-friendly, do so!
- If the dinner lends itself, consider using paper plates, paper cups and plastic utensils to reduce noise. For some people with hearing loss, hearing aids can make forks and knives clinking against china overpower the sound of a dinner partner's speech.
- Before the party assess lighting both natural sunlight and electrical fixtures, . Try to avoid having people sit in front of a window on a sunny day; their faces will be darkened by the brightness behind them. Rooms lit with fixtures controlled by a dimmer switch are ideal. Recessed lighting is very bright; yet because it's indirect, it's usually not hard on the eyes. If lighting is too dim or bright, replace bulbs. Track lighting can be manipulated to optimal angles. Bring a friend over before the party so you can play with the lighting. If you're entertaining at night, do this at night to get a clearer idea how the lighting will be at party time.

Food

- Avoid foods that require a great deal of chewing or crunching, such as nuts or oversized sandwiches, because they can make conversation difficult to understand.
- If you don't care to cook or bake, order food in. Or find a restaurant that offers the use of a private room for little or no extra charge.
- Have a potluck brunch or dinner, allowing guests to make and bring their treasured recipes. You can supply the drinks, cups, plates and utensils.
- Have a party catered in your home. Ask your favorite restaurant to prepare and deliver the food. Pick up pre-made sandwiches at a local deli, or have a friend pick these up for you if the place doesn't make deliveries. You may decide to buy all the fixings for sandwiches, display them attractively on plates (or have the local deli do this for you) and let guests have fun making their own sandwiches!

Timing

When you're considering throwing a party, think about the time of day you're at your best! Morning people can throw brunches. Do your spirits soar in the afternoon? Throw a tea party! Men who are "night" people can throw a poker or gin rummy party.

Themes

Theme parties are wonderful for hosts who have hearing loss because they help focus your guests on a topic you've chosen and are familiar with. People who love to play games can offer visitors a choice of games to play. Have a couple of card tables set up for this, so more than one game can be played.

- Host a wine tasting at home—or at a local winery!
- Host a chocolate tasting with rows of small dishes filled with different types of chocolate.
- Tea party—ask guests to wear hats and gloves, or bring various teas to share with others. "Low" tea can take place in mid-afternoon, and it can be as simple as tea and scones, cupcakes and/or cake. "High" tea is actually a light supper, served later in the evening.
- Have folks in for cakes and sweets and have an Ice Cream Social.

Party Ideas Tried and Tested

Sports Night Party

HLAA Rochester Chapter Member Ginger Graham had five guests over to her house for a Super Bowl Sunday party. She reports that she was the sole person in the group with hearing loss. She invites guests to sit down and discuss the game before it begins, including the teams and players involved. Then she gives guests the option of watching the game with or without closed captions being exposed. "In football, it isn't really necessary to have all the dialogue, so I will turn them off," she says. "With my new cochlear implant I now can understand a lot of what is being said about each play."

You could also borrow a television and place it side-by-side with yours. Then you can activate closed captioning on one TV and sound on either one. Thanksgiving dinner at HLAA Rochester Chapter Member Marlene Sutcliffe's home was easier on her ears, thanks to her advance planning: She put her television and her CD player in an unused upstairs guest room.

"I wanted to enjoy my guests as much as possible," she says. "Entertaining in my own home made it easier to control the day for me. No one chose to listen to music, but periodically people checked the TV for game updates."

Hosting Outside the Home

Find a restaurant with a private room. Or make arrangements for out-of-town guests to tour a local museum or historic home. Eat in the museum's café or in a small, quiet restaurant nearby— or at your place.

See You...or See You at My Place Parties, receptions and gatherings are a fact of life. Even if you aren't a very social person, sooner or later you might be asked to host a birthday party, baby or wedding shower, funeral reception or to host out-of-town relatives and friends. Hopefully, the guidelines described above will energize you and decrease your anxiety over entertaining others. Whenever you're invited to a noisy, dim and overcrowded eatery or drinkery, you can thank your hosts and say "See you at my place next time!"