

9 Things to Know About Hearing Loss From the Perspective of the Communication Partner

By Pat Dobbs

If, like me, you have a hearing loss, you know what your hearing challenges are. But what about your friends and family? Do they have challenges communicating with you? I bet the answer is yes. Why wouldn't they? Hearing loss is a communication disorder that affects all the people in our lives.

The challenges our hearing loss presents to our friends and family, also known as our communication partners, depend on factors such as the length and severity of our hearing loss and the depth of our relationships. This article is inspired by what I've learned from my teacher and mentor Sam Trychin, Ph.D., a psychologist, educator, author, and creator of his Living With Hearing Loss Program.

Here are a few comments I've heard informally from friends who live with hearing impaired people (like me) and insights into what both sides may be thinking.

1 We don't acknowledge our hearing loss.

For many of us, it can take years before we acknowledge our hearing loss and get hearing aids. Or we get hearing aids but keep them safely tucked away in a drawer. Both scenarios are frustrating and

annoying for our partners. They have to talk louder, listen to blaring TVs, and hope we understand important instructions and information. It's a shame that something could be done about these problems, but regrettably, we tend to either deny that there is a problem or hope it will go away on its own.

2 We ask our partners to change how they talk to us.

So that we can better understand our partners, we ask them to make direct eye contact when they talk to us, not to talk with their backs turned to us or from another room, talk more clearly, louder but not too loud, slower but not too slow. (Are we demanding or what!)

For instance, Debbie says she tries to talk in whichever way it's best for her husband with a hearing loss to hear her. But sometimes she forgets. After all, it's different from the way she and other people with typical

hearing have been communicating all their lives. Even when she talks as he has asked her to, her husband may misunderstand what she's saying, and asks her to repeat. Debbie tries not to get annoyed but admits she does. She understands why her husband doesn't hear, but it's still challenging for her. Patience is necessary. Patience, she reminds herself again and again.

Laura says it's hard for her to remember to not call to her husband from another room, as she's done for years. It's inconvenient because now she has to go where he is. She misses not being able to whisper a comment at the movies. Now she waits until she can speak in a normal tone. Then she may forget what she wanted to say. And she says she sorely misses intimate bedtime conversations in the dark because her husband now needs to have light on her face in order to hear her.

3 We make our partners deal with blaring radio and TV.

Unless we've learned how to listen to the radio and TV with our hearing aids or assistive listening devices, we turn up the volume so loud that it can hurt our partner's ears.

Ellen told me her husband refuses to get hearing aids. He cranks up the volume of their TV so loud that it's painful to her ears and she can't watch in the same room with him anymore. Now he watches TV in another room with a closed door. Even with the door shut, it's still too loud. Aside from the noise, what she misses most is the intimacy of watching TV together.

4 We can talk to our partners, but often they can't respond to us.

There are situations when we can talk to our partners, but they can't respond where we can understand them. Examples are when we're driving, have a headache, or have auditory fatigue and are too tired to focus on listening. Then there are the times when we ask a question without a simple yes-or-no answer, and forget we can't look at our partners because we're driving or need to be looking in another direction. We're forcing them to wait to give us an answer.

This is one of Anne's complaints. It annoys her that her hearing loss husband can talk to her, but when he's driving or tired, she can't respond to him because he wouldn't hear her. Annoying, Anne says, very annoying.

5 We often bluff.

One of our worst habits is bluffing, pretending to understand what our partner has said when we haven't. Our partners hate this. They wonder what's the use of talking if we just mimic back facial expressions or respond out of context.

Gary can tell when his wife is bluffing and calls her on it immediately. Barbara hates calling her husband on it because he's sensitive and embarrassed by his hearing loss. She tries to rephrase her questions, hoping he will give her a valid answer, rather than pretend.

6 We resist confirming important information.

If our partner is relating important information like when and where to meet them, they may ask us to repeat it to confirm that we've gotten it right. Hopefully, we have the grace to do that, but we're often annoyed at being second-guessed.

Henry says that when he asks his hard of hearing wife to repeat critical information, she slams back that she's got it, only to find out later that she misheard. Of course, this causes problems and total frustration that could easily have been avoided had she confirmed what Henry said or he had written the instructions down.



7 We get insulted when our partners say "never mind."

There's nothing we hate more than when our partners say "never mind" when we ask them to repeat a passing punch line. They know that perfect moment is lost and wouldn't make sense. So how do they feel about repeating that punchline? It's awkward for them as that critical moment is lost. But if they don't repeat it, we'll get angry or hurt or something in between. We all know how we feel if someone says "never mind." Think about how they feel when they have to repeat something that only works in the moment.

8 We often tune out.

What should our partners do when they know we can't hear a conversation and tune out? Should they be our ears and repeat everything, or summarize the highlights? Should they let us deal with the situation ourselves? The answer probably depends on how important the information is, the mood, and the setting.

John feels awful when he sees his wife left out like that, but he's never sure what to do. He doesn't want her to feel ignored but worries that he might be helping her too much. Would it be better for her to advocate for herself? He's never sure of the right balance. And sometimes, when he does advocate for her, she gets annoyed because she feels he's overstepping.

What is clear is that hearing loss is a communication disorder that affects all our relationships. Working through communication problems isn't easy. Partners that have been together a long time still have their glitches. Good communications mixed with love, humor, and patience helps everyone deal with these difficult and frustrating situations.

9 We're saddened by our loss but so are our partners.

Our partners are saddened by the loss of communication they once had with us because we interact less as our hearing gets worse. We try to avoid social gatherings like family events, or different types of entertainment because it is too difficult for us to understand what is being said. If we do go, people often think we are rude or depressed because we don't participate. This directly affects our partners. They miss the interaction we used to have.

Then there are the private conversations at home. In bed at night, we need to have the light on to see our faces. When we hug, there's a good chance our hearing aids or cochlear implants will fall out. Our partner's words of love could provoke romantic responses like "Huh? What'd you say?" Really romantic!

The Five Stages of Loss

Our communication loss is also our partner's loss. We both go through the five stages of loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Each person experiences them in different ways and at different times.

What is clear is that hearing loss is a communication disorder that affects all our relationships. Working through communication problems isn't easy. Partners that have been together a long time still have their glitches. Good communications mixed with love, humor, and patience helps everyone deal with these difficult and frustrating situations. I have to chuckle to myself—because communicating is the answer to working out our challenges because this is a communication disorder. Thank goodness we can laugh. —



*Pat Dobbs started to lose her hearing when she was 20 and today is the happy recipient of cochlear implants. Through most of her life she bought into the stigma of hearing loss until finally she came to terms with it. She launched the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) Morris County Chapter in New Jersey, serving as president. She also attended Gallaudet University's two-year peer mentoring program. Inspired by this program, she designed and facilitated a series of workshops on managing hearing loss, and began coaching practice focusing on the unique personal, career, and relationship challenges unique to people with hearing loss. Dobbs is the president of SayWhatClub, a global online hearing loss support group and a new resident of Deer Isle, Maine. For more, see *Hearing Loss Evolution*, at hearinglossevolution.com.*

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