

Caregivers and Hearing Loss

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Loretta had always loved her Aunt Ethel (she was Aunt Eta to the family) who was over 80 years old. Loretta and her siblings provided home care service to her in order to keep Eta in the house she loved, a small two bedroom unit she had called home for 55 years. Loretta had observed changes in Eta's behavior over the past year. Eta wasn't paying close attention to conversations any more. Her funny, bird-like laugh wasn't as spontaneous as it used to be. She seemed to laugh as an afterthought, following the cues of others in the room. Eta sometimes even answered questions with completely inappropriate statements. At a recent visit, she ignored Dr. Hopper when he spoke to her until Loretta noticed that the doctor was speaking behind Eta while looking down, writing in her chart. "She's losing her hearing" Loretta said to the doctor. After a brief hearing exam, Dr. Hopper confirmed her observation.

Loretta should now bring Eta to be examined by an otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat medical specialist) to determine if hearing aids would correct Eta's hearing loss. From there, an audiologist or hearing instrument specialist could then recommend a hearing aid that would provide assistance.

Once a person begins to lose their hearing simple things can be done to help them understand conversation. Here are just a few suggestions:

Face the person to whom you're speaking. Don't speak away from them or talk to them from another room. Shouting isn't going to help them understand. Volume usually isn't the problem; clarity is the problem. Speak clearly and slowly, and as loud as necessary. Don't talk with your mouth full (food, gum, cigarettes). Don't cover your mouth with your hand while speaking. Rephrase your sentence or question if it's not understood the first time.

Carrying on a conversation is very difficult for people with hearing loss when there is background sound from a TV, radio or computer in the room. Lower or turn off sources of noise while talking to hard-of-hearing people.

Most people occasionally mumble at times until we begin to think about how we sound to others. Pay attention to how you sound while you speak. This will enable you to become aware of occasions when you do mumble or speak too quickly.

Understand your speaking style. Many teens and young adults speak very quickly and without clear pronunciation. It is very difficult for the hard-of-hearing to understand them. If you have difficulty monitoring your speaking style, consider taking a speech or acting class to learn how to speak more clearly.

People with higher-pitched voices may be hard to understand for people with hearing loss. That includes children and some women. If a person with hearing loss has difficulty hearing you, one of the changes you could make is to try dropping the tone of your voice.

If you have a hearing loss, acknowledge your difficulty in understanding spoken words. Don't nod and smile as if you comprehend every word. Tell your conversation partner that you have a hearing loss and you need them to rephrase or to repeat what was said. Take ownership for your hearing loss. It is rarely a temporary condition. Get a medical examination to determine if hearing aids will benefit you. The technology today is vastly superior.

More resources

Learn about the Hearing Loss Association of America. There is a local chapter in Grand Rapids which presents programs monthly at Metro Health Hospital on the second Wednesday of the month, excluding July and August. Programs cover a range of topics related to hearing loss and are held in the West Conference Room at Metro, 1919 Boston SE from 7:00-8:30pm. Go to www.hearinglossgrandrapids.org for more information.