

Caregiving for a parent with a Hearing Loss

Kendra S. Schumaker, Executive Director, SarahCare Adult Day Center

I don't think I realized how growing up as an only child, in a single parent household, affected me until I had children of my own. My circumstance was unique in that my mother began losing her hearing in her early thirties; I was around seven at the time. By the time she was forty, her hearing was almost completely gone. She has a fairly rare disease which progressively robbed her not only of her hearing, but also her balance, and subsequently much of her independence as well. She was unable to talk on the phone, could not make appointments for herself such as doctor visits or car repair. Because she could not hear her own voice it was difficult to sing along with the hymns at church. Eventually she began to limit her social activities, and participation in large group events (such as family gatherings) became frustrating.

My mother was fortunate in that she lost her hearing after she was an adult, and old enough to have well developed speech, language, and voice inflection. She was also fortunate that she could lip read quite well. Where she was not fortunate was that her most difficult voice range to understand was the lower tones, i.e. men. She was at even more of a disadvantage if the man she was speaking to had a mustache, beard, or if he did not look at her while speaking to her. I remember one particularly bad experience when my mother was trying to buy a car. I was thirteen at the time, and was serving as an interpreter of sorts between the salesman and my mother. What made the experience unfortunate was how we were treated in the dealership. The salesman was impatient. His voice was low, he had a mustache (no fault of his own), and he did not think we were seriously going to buy a car that day. That particular Saturday was the first time I really noticed that our situation was different. There were no other kids in the dealership, and the salesman acted as if he was used to very little communication with his customers. For me it seemed awkward, and somewhat embarrassing. Of course, if I would have known then what I know now, I am certain I would have felt differently!

I married in August of 1990. By then, my mother had less than five percent hearing in one ear, and less than thirty percent in the other. I was concerned that she wouldn't be able to follow along with the ceremony, so I printed a special booklet with all the songs, prayers, vows, etc. in it so she could follow along. The problem was that the booklet was so thick, and the ceremony was relatively quick, so it was difficult for her to keep up with where we were in the ceremony. All in all, that part of the day went very well, but again it was a sad reminder of how much our sense of hearing helps us enjoy everyday life.

Shortly after our wedding, my mother had been seen by a specialist, and it was determined that she would be a candidate for a Cochlear Implant. A Cochlear Implant is a device which is implanted in the head, and then magnetically connected by an external piece which is connected to a processor. The benefits of this device were amazing. After she recovered from the surgery, and the processor was set specifically for her, she re-discovered her world. Her experience with

the Cochlear Implant was that she could use the phone again, she could talk to other people and actually hear what they were saying, she could hear the clock tick, and the refrigerator run. She could set an alarm on her oven and when it would buzz, she could actually hear it! She was able to communicate like she had not been able to for several years! Her relationships deepened with friends and family, and she regained much of the independence with everyday life activities she had lost over the years.

Since she has had the Cochlear Implant seventeen years ago, her hearing probably has continued to decline somewhat. The implant, however, has helped significantly with her ability to communicate. Her friends and family have been very supportive of her hearing loss, the implant, and her desire to remain independent (especially with the telephone). My mother has several medical problems which she gets treatment for. She has seen numerous physicians, has had various surgeries, and hospitalizations. As a concerned daughter, I try to make sure medical personnel realize what the Cochlear Implant is, and how important it is for her to have on during the day if she is hospitalized. I have also looked for alternate ways to assist with communication such as having a pen and notebook handy. I have found that when people understand the depth of the hearing loss, they are much more patient and understanding.

Really, when it comes to caregiving, we do it in so many ways. Each person, circumstance, and family is unique. Caregiving isn't something most of us set out to do. It is usually a situation we find ourselves in, usually long after the caregiving duties have begun. Being a good caregiver is not about how well, or how many, things you do for your loved one. Rather, it is about how much independence you can still foster while helping to meet their care needs. It is not about doing everything perfectly, but doing your best within your particular set of circumstances.

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