Caregiver’s Corner Column (May 2013)

A New Dance: A Family Caregiver/Spouse Perspective on Hearing Loss
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Communication is the glue that binds relationships between friends and family. When living with someone who has a severe hearing impairment it is necessary to gracefully learn and alter our communication style. Bill and I have been married for 25 years, and we are still in the process of improving our communication routines...similar to learning to dance. Referring to myself as a family caregiver sounds rather clinical, but as we deal with hearing loss I really benefit from understanding this role and strive to learn new strategies for working around the hearing impairment. With the new powerful digital hearing aid technology, our amazing audiologists and the assistive devices on the market we are able to reach new levels. Our home phone today is "Caption Call" which sends text on a screen of the entire conversation. This is just one example of the progress from the days where a hearing impaired person could barely hear on the telephone at all.

A hearing impairment can be an obstacle to getting out with people and being involved. Bill has found this is a common struggle for individuals with hearing loss. With proper support from family caregivers and a little willingness on the part of the hearing impaired, social interaction can be the difference between “just living…and living well”.

I learned to become a caregiver, by carrying hearing aid batteries in my purse, protecting him from getting wet (never tip the canoe) and finishing all pillow talk before the hearing aids came out. He has a “Shake Awake” alarm clock set to vibrate the bed in the morning. He has set up closed captioning on the TV and he has found a digital TV system that sends the TV sound directly to his hearing aids. He has recently upgraded to an IPAD which he can read and listen to digitally (without a headset directly to his hearing aids). The phone has improved with the blue tooth technology as well. In living with Bill, I miss being able to whisper in a movie. Conversing in the car can be challenging as well, especially if there are people in the back seat trying to talk. I have heard that autos can be looped. The looping technology is available all over West Michigan. This technology helps Bill hear at church on Sunday and various concerts and plays around town. The irritations and frustrations that I feel as a caregiver, pale in comparison to the daily nuisances he faces in trying to navigate and hear what is going on around him. As a caregiver, the advances in technology help provide the necessary tools for further independence for the affected individual.

Hearing loss has required me to speak clearly and express myself, and not to expect Bill to pick up on the inflections in my voice and the innuendos. As a family caregiver, I have found the most courteous thing people can do is ask if they are speaking clearly and loud enough and if there is anything that they need to repeat. He finds it very considerate when a host asks where the best place to sit might be. A little effort on the part of the other person helps the hearing impaired individual feel accepted and understood.

Bill has enjoyed many adventures which he continues to share with the community. He speaks to many different groups and corporations about team building, problem solving and adversity- These are issues that are also important to caregivers. We are both passionate about remaining physically active with a hearing impairment. When surrounded by nature, the affected individual and the caregiver can momentarily forget their challenges. Bill works to see that people have opportunities through adaptive sports groups like No Barriers USA, Global Explorers and Hear the World. Our family has embraced hearing loss and much of our journey is committed to serving those who struggle with this condition. Much work can still be done to get hearing aids covered by insurance and help alleviate the stigma associated with wearing them. We will continue to live loudly, work tirelessly and play vigorously and encourage family caregivers and those affected with hearing loss to join us in our mission.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title IIIE, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.