

Caregiver's Corner Column (May 2014)

Everyone Knows (or Cares for) Someone with Hearing Loss

By Sanford Freed, President

SafeCall Home Medical Alarms

Hearing loss is an invisible condition. There are no wheelchairs, canes or other physical clues to the disability. However if you provide care for someone with a hearing loss, or if you have one yourself, the condition is always there. It affects you at every step of every day.

Many people with hearing loss try to deny their condition (6 years is the average length of denial) so we smile and nod our heads as if we understand everything....but we don't. If you provide care to someone with a hearing loss you can never assume that a verbal message was heard clearly. I suggest asking your care recipient "Did you understand that?" in a clear tone of voice; don't sound annoyed or judgmental. Do watch your body language too; don't roll your eyes or make a scoffing sound. Do face the other person and speak clearly without chewing gum or food or covering your mouth. If you have a moustache, keep it trimmed. All these steps will help someone to speech-read you if they need to.

These are important steps that will enhance normal conversation. It is very important that caregivers learn how to speak understandably to someone with hearing loss. Otherwise everyone becomes frustrated. It becomes frustrating to repeat yourself. It becomes frustrating to not understand what people are saying to you. After a while we stop trying. A frustrated caregiver may decide to make decisions for the impaired-care-recipient further increasing that person's frustration. You see that this goes nowhere very quickly. And where it really causes problems is in a doctor's office when you are receiving instructions and need to communicate effectively with the care-recipient.

One of the main frustrations when you have a hearing loss is background noise. When you have 'normal' hearing, background noise is not nearly as big a deal as it is when you have a hearing loss. Sure, sometimes everyone has difficulty hearing in a noisy room.

The problem is worse when you have a hearing loss: Hearing aids boost the sound frequencies that a person is least able to hear, but that always includes the human voice range. Speaking over a TV set means that your loved one (or you) have to be heard over the sound of (usually) someone else speaking. That's why hearing aides often don't seem to work. How do you expect them to make preferred speech more understandable while they make other speech less understandable?

This is why it is very challenging to care for someone with hearing loss even when they wear hearing aides. And if you, the caregiver, are wearing the hearing aides it is more important that you manage the sound level of the home in order to hear accurately. You can do this by:

- Keeping TV and computer volumes as low as possible.
- Don't have multiple TVs on throughout the home.
- Set phone ringers loud enough to hear.
- Move the phones on top of tables and counters so they are more easily heard.

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 III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.