

Caregiver's Corner Column (May 2014)

Please Use the Microphone and Other Tales of Hearing Advocacy

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SafeCall Home Medical Alarms

I have a hearing loss that has required me to wear hearing aids for the past 29 years. I've gotten very used to them and get through life pretty well. There are a number of things that I have learned from using hearing aids, and one of the major lessons is self-advocacy.

Because hearing loss is "invisible" - no wheelchair, cane or other physical clues to the disability - people just don't notice it unless you make them aware. 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. Moving past denial is essential in order to receive treatment, maintain self-respect and enjoy a good quality of life.

And sometimes we just have to advocate for ourselves. Nothing big; just say "Excuse me, but I have a hearing loss and didn't understand what you just said. Please repeat it slower, or take your hand away from your mouth, or face me, or move over here where the light is better...". That's all. It's not hard. Most people will accommodate that type of request.

However, what if someone can no longer advocate for themselves? This is where those of us who are family caregivers may need to step in and assume this advocacy role. Whether caring for a parent, spouse, sibling or friend we may need to speak on behalf of our loved one and ask others to accommodate their hearing loss. In failing to do so healthcare providers and others may begin to speak directly to you rather than your loved one. The end result is decreased dignity and further isolation for your loved one with hearing loss.

As an advocate it may be necessary for me to speak up and ask someone speaking in a group setting to use a microphone. But I won't tolerate a public speaker refusing to use a microphone because 'I don't like to' or 'you can hear me, can't you?' I will ask the speaker if they are going to say anything important. They say 'of course' or 'well I hope so' while they wonder what kind of person would ask such a stupid question. I then reply 'If it's important enough to hear, then I suggest you use the microphone otherwise some of us won't hear you'. It is not my intention to embarrass anyone. I just want to make the point that any speaker needs to take the entire audience into account.

This is also true in small group interactions. It is very natural for people to look in the direction that they are pointing when giving directions. They don't look at the person to whom they are speaking. When you have a hearing loss, it is very important that someone speaks TO you, facing you so that you will HEAR the message and SEE their lips. I will ask my direction-giver to face me instead of pointing and speaking away from me. Simple advocacy. I don't worry about appearing dim. That happens when I need to ask directions a second time from another person because I couldn't follow the original instructions. As a caregiving advocate, you may also need to speak out for your loved one in similar circumstances.

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