

## COMMUNICATION TIPS For Adults With Hearing Loss

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When you communicate, you share ideas, feelings, or information with at least one other person, usually by listening and speaking. If you have a hearing loss, however, speech may not be loud or clear enough, especially in a noisy or group situation. Words or sentences are misunderstood, and wrong messages are received. This often leads to embarrassment.

Some people think that speechreading (watching the lips, facial expressions, and gestures of another person) can solve all these listening problems. Speechreading can be very helpful, because many words that are difficult to hear can still be seen on the lips. But some communication situations remain difficult even when you use both your listening and speechreading skills together. Speechreading doesn't help much when the lighting is poor or when the speaker is too far away, doesn't move his/her lips, or covers his/her mouth. In most of these situations, listening is difficult as well.

The group situation is particularly difficult for the hearing impaired person. Keeping up with changing speakers presents problems; it's hard to listen to more than one person at a time or to

keep up with the conversation when the topic changes suddenly. Even the best speechreader has problems with group communication.

Other problems are caused by the nature of our language. Many sounds are not visible on the lips because they are made in the back of the mouth. Try saying the word *cake* while you watch yourself in the mirror. You won't see much movement. Also, many words look alike. Watch yourself in the mirror while you say the following words: *pat, bat, mat, pad, mad, bad*. Can you see any difference?

Adjustments are possible in difficult communication situations. First you must become aware of what is causing the communication breakdown. Then you can use positive strategies to improve your chances of receiving correct messages from the speaker. Let's discuss some of these strategies.

### Coping with the Physical Setting

You can depend on your vision as well as your hearing to receive information. If you can't see the speaker clearly, you can't speechread very well. Perhaps the speaker is talking to you from another room or with his/her back turned. Perhaps the speaker is too far away. Here are some of the things you can do:

- A speaker who talks with his/her back to you or from another room probably does not understand the communication problem. It is your responsibility to explain to friends, relatives, and others in a tactful manner that you must see their faces clearly in order to under-

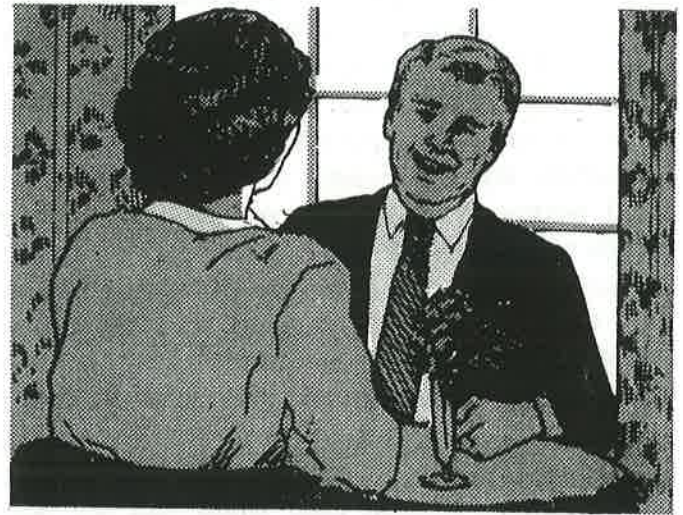
This publication is one of a series produced by the **National Information Center on Deafness** and the **American-Speech-Language-Hearing Association**. The series focuses on understanding the realities of hearing loss in adulthood and suggests practical adjustments to that loss for hearing impaired persons, their families, friends, and the professionals who serve them.

stand. People who care will not be offended when you state your needs.

- If the speaker is in another room or too far away for comfortable conversation, move closer.
- If you are going to a meeting or a lecture, it is very important to have a seat close to the speaker so that you can speechread. This also helps listening. A good seat is located in the center of one of the front rows, away from pillars or supports. In order to get a good seat, you must arrive early. If that is not possible, perhaps someone will change seats with you. It is worth asking.
- If you can order theater tickets in advance, be sure to ask for a good seat. In order to do that, you must become familiar with the layout of the theater; order tickets early, and be willing to explain to the ticket agent why you need special seating.
- Use your vision well. If you suspect a visual problem, see your doctor. If you need to wear glasses, always use them when speechreading.
- At a meeting or lecture, ask the presenter to use the blackboard or an overhead projector as much as possible. Also ask in advance for lecture notes or other written material about the lecture. Get a copy in advance of the agenda of a meeting you plan to attend. Knowing the topic or topics to be discussed helps considerably in understanding the spoken message.
- Arrange for someone to take notes for you at a meeting or lecture. That leaves you free to concentrate on listening and speechreading.
- Another way to keep up with discussion is to arrange for a flip-board to be used throughout the meeting. Topics of discussion and important information such as names and numbers are written on the flip-board as they come up. Arrange for the flip-board before the meeting.
- Proper seating is important for listening too, especially when you are using a hearing aid. Avoid sitting near hard walls and other hard surfaces. Sound tends to bounce off such surfaces, creating distortion.
- Involve the speaker in improving the listen-

ing environment. Insist that he/she use a microphone at a meeting or lecture. If possible, discuss the use of the microphone with the speaker before the meeting. Sometimes, speakers are "microphone shy" but will use one if asked. Keep in mind that other people also have problems when a speaker does not use a microphone. You are helping others as well as yourself.

Another common problem with the physical setting is poor lighting. If the light is behind a speaker's back, you will see a face in shadow and thus have trouble speechreading. The light should be directly overhead or slightly in front of the speaker (but not directed into your eyes). What are some things you can do in a situation with poor lighting?



*Well-placed lighting is important to speechreading. If the light is behind a speaker's back, the face will be in shadow, making speechreading difficult.*



*Light coming from an angle slightly in front of the speaker will not shine in your eyes or obscure the speaker's lips and expression.*



- Tell your communication partner that you are having trouble speechreading because the lighting is poor. Show that person exactly how to change position so that you can see his or her face clearly. Most people will not be offended if asked politely.
- At a lecture or a meeting, discuss lighting problems with a presenter before the session starts. If you cannot plan in advance to avoid lighting problems, then choose a seat that allows the clearest view of the speaker.
- When you leave a dark place for a well lit one, your eyes need a few minutes to adjust. Do not try to speechread during that time.

## Managing Noisy Situations

Hearing aids pick up all sound within range, noise as well as speech. At a party, in the cafeteria, or at home, noise can make communication almost impossible. What can you do?

- Let the speaker know you are having trouble hearing because of background noise. Suggest a quieter place to communicate. For example, if you are conversing next to a noisy fan, move to another part of the room. In a restaurant, sit at a table in a secluded corner.
- If possible, remove the source of noise. Sometimes we try to communicate with the television, radio or running water turned on. These noises are easily eliminated.
- If possible, avoid rooms with poor acoustics. Rooms with hard walls, no carpeting, no acoustic tile on the ceiling, extensive window surfaces or no drapes make understanding difficult, even for people with normal hearing. If you go to meetings in such rooms frequently and have continual problems, ask that the meetings be transferred to a better place.
- There are special listening devices (induction loops, radio frequency hearing aids, or infrared systems) that can be installed in meeting rooms or auditoriums. These devices allow the speaker's voice to be made louder than competing noise. Ask your audiologist for information about such devices.

- Sometimes the noise in a room stops and starts, rather than continuing all the time. For example, if you are near an airport, airplane noise can make conversation very difficult. It is a good idea to stop conversation until the noise stops.
- Remember that communicating in noise is difficult for everyone, including normal hearing people. They make allowances for this and ask for help in noisy situations. You can, too.

## Coping with a Poor Speaker

We have all encountered people who speak with food, a cigarette, or a pipe in their mouths. People with normal hearing have problems understanding such individuals, but communication becomes much more difficult when the listener has a hearing loss. Other speaker characteristics may not prove very difficult for the hearing person, but they complicate communication for the hearing impaired. These include: the speaker who talks too fast and uses distracting gestures, limited facial expression, or little mouth movement. In addition, a beard or mustache that covers the lips often makes speechreading difficult. What can be done?

- Explain the difficulty to the speaker and indicate tactfully what you need for better communication. Explain that it is impossible to speechread individuals with things in or covering their mouths. In most cases, the speaker is probably not aware that these habits are interfering with speech understanding.
- Ask the person to speak a little more slowly. A slow rate of speech often has other benefits. Distracting head movements tend to slow down or even stop. Words are pronounced more clearly. Sometimes a person also uses more facial expression and clearer mouth movements when speaking more slowly. Sometimes the speaker will also talk a little louder.
- If the speaker is a friend or relative, feel free to ask that a mustache or beard be trimmed to make lips more visible. Often the person will be glad to do so. If not, nothing has been lost.

- Remember that time can contribute to improved communication. Sometimes it is possible to become accustomed to a particular pattern of speech. The more you talk with a person, the easier it becomes to understand, even if that person has poor speech habits.

## Managing the Group Situation

Understanding conversation in a group is probably the most difficult communication situation for a hearing impaired person. One problem is that the conversation may jump quickly from person to person. By the time you identify the new speaker, some of the message is lost. In addition, some of the speakers may not be visible to you because of your physical position. This is a common situation when you are part of an audience and a person in back of you asks a question.

Still another problem relates to the topic of conversation. If you enter a group in the middle of a discussion, you will probably not know the topic. Normal-hearing people face the same problem of catching up with the conversation, but this task is far more difficult when a person cannot hear clearly. A sudden change of topic usually leaves the hearing impaired person totally lost. Although a shift of topic may occur in one-to-one communication, it is far more difficult to get on the right track in a group. Here are some strategies that can help:

- When the conversation shifts rapidly from person to person, a speaker can signal in some way before starting to talk. You can ask speakers to raise a finger or a hand before they begin talking. This strategy can work well at the dinner table or in a group discussion.
- In group situations, some hearing impaired people use a microphone attached to their hearing aids by a long cable. The microphone is passed from speaker to speaker as needed. This arrangement not only makes the speaker's voice louder but also identifies the person who is talking.
- To help when the topic of conversation changes, a friend or relative can serve as a "cuer" to tell you when and to what the topic has changed. You need to tell everyone else

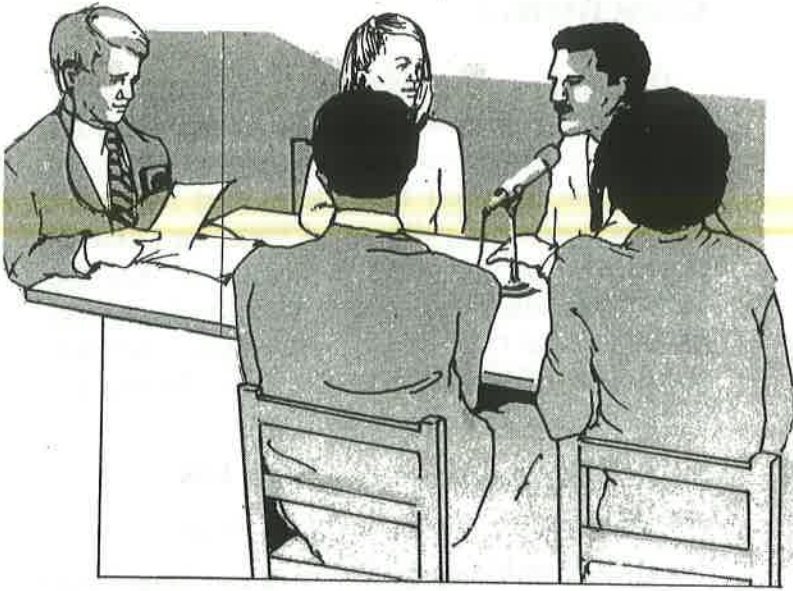
of this arrangement and to ask for a short delay in the conversation while your "cuer" tells you of the new topic. At a meeting you can ask the group leader to indicate in some way when the topic changes. Perhaps the leader can interject at the proper moment "We are now talking about . . ."

- If you enter a situation in which a conversation is already in progress, always ask, "What are we talking about" or something similar.
- If several people are talking at one time, tell the group that you can understand only one person at a time. Many normal-hearing people have the same problem.
- In order to see the maximum number of people in a group, seat yourself appropriately. The best position will vary with the situation. In order to see the maximum number of people at a table, it is best to sit at the head or foot rather than at the side. You can see more people without having to move your body. In a living room, it is better to sit on a chair rather than a sofa. People sitting next to you on the sofa are difficult to see, making it necessary to speechread from the side rather than the front.
- If you are at a lecture or large meeting, and cannot see a person speaking from the audience, wait until the person is finished. Then raise your hand and ask the group leader to repeat the question or comment. Even better, arrange this with the group leader in advance. Used tactfully, this strategy will not disrupt the proceedings. Another approach is to ask the questioner to stand up and repeat what was said.



*Seating arrangements can help or hinder communication. Choose a seat that allows you to see the maximum number of people in a conversational group.*





*Some hearing impaired people use special amplification devices in group situations. A microphone attached to a hearing aid or additional amplifier and passed from speaker to speaker can be very helpful to a hearing impaired listener.*

## When You Don't Understand Something

Sometimes, in spite of all your efforts, you simply don't understand what a person is saying. The strategy that most people use is repetition. If you don't understand the repetition, however, it is not a good idea to ask the speaker to say something a third time. There are other ways to clarify a misunderstood message:

- You can repeat back the part of the sentence that was understood and ask the speaker to supply the rest. For example, the speaker might say, "I met John in the store." Your problem is that you did not catch the name. You might then say, "You met *whom* in the store?" The speaker then knows specifically how to help.
- You can ask for clarification of what the speaker said. For example, if you do not understand directions, you might say, "I think you told me to turn right at the next corner. Is that correct?" Another approach is to ask, "Did you say to turn right at the next corner?"
- The speaker may be asked to rephrase a statement that you did not understand. You can say, "I'm sorry, I don't understand. Can you say it another way?"

- If you do not understand a specific word, such as a name or a number, you can ask the speaker to spell or write it. This is useful if you must have precise information. If the speaker spells a word and you do not understand the spoken letters, it is possible to use a code word to clarify the spelling. You can ask, "Was that 'A' as in *apple*?"
- If you are having trouble understanding a spoken number, you can ask the speaker to give the number one digit at a time. For example, one hundred forty-four can be spoken as one-four-four. Each spoken digit can be reinforced by showing the appropriate number of fingers. Speaking numbers as individual digits can be helpful with telephone communication as well as face-to-face conversation.
- Another useful strategy for small numbers is counting. If you cannot understand a number, you can ask the speaker to count from zero and stop at the correct number. You can even count silently along with the speaker to be sure that you have the correct number. This strategy is very useful on the telephone.
- A combination of these two strategies will work as well for large numbers. There are several ways for a speaker to say numbers. The number 2,454, for example, can be "two thousand four hundred fifty-four," or "twenty-four fifty-four." If you understand neither, ask the speaker to give the number one digit at a time as "two-four-five-four." If you still have difficulty, then ask the speaker to count up to each number in sequence: "one-two"; "one-two-three-four"; "one-two-three-four-five"; "one-two-three-four."

Practice these strategies whenever appropriate. You will find they make communication easier both for you and your communication partner.

## Some Other Tactics

**Be Interested and Interesting.** Current events are often the topic of conversation, so be aware of what is happening nationally and locally. Keep up with sports news, with popular TV shows, with what is happening in your neighborhood. Keep up with your friends' interests. Develop your

own interests and hobbies and share them with your friends. By doing these things, you will be better prepared to understand most conversations. In addition, other people will want to talk with you and will make an extra effort to help you communicate.

**Be Prepared.** When you go to a movie or play, read the reviews or summary of the plot in advance. You will have a better idea of what is being said and will enjoy the performance more. Prepare for meetings by getting prior information about topics and agenda so that you can practice recognizing important words. Also, you will be ready for topic changes. Before you go into a particular situation, think of what a speaker is likely to say. Make a list of vocabulary appropriate to that situation and practice recognizing those words. For example, you can predict pretty well what the garage mechanic will say when you take your car in for service.

**Be Observant.** Watch everything about the speaker. Watch the facial expressions and body language. Most people will raise their eyebrows when asking a question and shake their heads to indicate a negative statement. You can often tell when someone is angry from the facial expressions and body position. If a speaker is talking about a particular person, he/she may point to or look at that person. All of this is valuable information.

**Be Honest and Assertive.** Do not pretend to understand when you are really confused. The speaker usually notices this after a while and may feel that you are not interested in the conversation.

The speaker may also wonder about your intelligence. It is much better to identify your hearing loss to other people and admit when you do not understand. Most people will try to help if you tell them what to do. The assertive person admits the problem and pleasantly tells the speaker exactly what kind of help is needed to improve communication.

**Keep Your Sense of Humor.** Even when you make a mistake and feel foolish, your willingness to laugh at yourself will help everyone to relax and feel comfortable.

## Conclusions

The suggested strategies can aid communication in various situations. You may feel comfortable using some, while others may not be useful to you. Perhaps you have developed additional ways of coping not discussed here. Any strategy that works for you is fine. Experiment with the techniques discussed in this fact sheet and any others you can think of. Use what you find helpful. Regardless of which strategies you choose, the important things to remember are:

- Be honest about your hearing loss.
- Be assertive about asking for help.
- Always think about how you can keep communication going.

## Suggested Readings

Bower, S.A. & Bower, G.G. (1976). *Asserting yourself: A positive guide for positive change*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

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Harrelson, L.M. (1982). Strategies for the hearing impaired. *Hearing Instruments*, 33 (10), 9-10.

Jacobs, M. (1979). *Speechreading strategies*. Rochester, NY: National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

Kaplan, H., Bally, S. & Garretson, C. (1985). *Speechreading: A way to improve understanding*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

Nithart, T. (1982). Some practical approaches to hearing rehabilitation. *Hearing Instruments*, 33 (10), 14-15.

Pappas, J.J., Graham, G.S., & Rolls, C.R. (1982). Psychological problems associated with hearing impairment. *Hearing Instruments*, 33 (10), 22-23.

Rupp, R.R. & Heavenrich, A.Z. (1982). Positive communicative game rules. *Hearing Instruments*, 33 (Part 1: 33 (9), 34; Part 2: 33 (10), 16-19; Part 3: 33 (11), 20-22.)



## Additional Resources

Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf  
3417 Volta Place, NW  
Washington, DC 20007  
(202) 337-5220 (Voice & TDD)

Provides information on speechreading, education, advocacy, aids and devices, and the psychological and social implications of deafness. The Oral Deaf Adults Section (ODAS), an active service group of hearing impaired adults, offers special activities and programs for its members.

National Association of the Deaf  
814 Thayer Avenue  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
(301) 587-1788 (Voice & TDD)

Provides information for its members and other interested persons about deafness, programs and services for deaf people, communication skills, legislation, employment rights, and advocacy.

National Association for Hearing and  
Speech Action  
10801 Rockville Pike  
Rockville, MD 20852  
(301) 897-8682 (Voice & TDD)

Provides consumer and public information about communication disorders. HELPLINE (call toll-free 800-638-8255) assists in finding professional assistance.

Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc.  
Suite 100  
7800 Wisconsin Avenue  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
(301) 657-2248  
(301) 657-2249 (TDD)

Provides information about dealing with hearing loss, assistive devices, and adjustment to loss of hearing. Advocates on issues concerning hard of hearing people and encourages the establishment of state and local SHHH chapters.

For price information on additional copies of this publication, contact the **National Information Center on Deafness**.

**ASHA** provides public information about communication disorders, including deafness, and the role of speech and hearing professionals in rehabilitation. Information about local direct services is also available.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
10801 Rockville Pike  
Rockville, MD 20852  
(301) 897-5700 (Voice and TDD)

**NICD** provides information in all areas related to hearing loss and deafness, including education, communication with persons with hearing loss, and assistive devices. Makes referrals whenever possible to local and community services.

National Information Center on Deafness  
Gallaudet University  
800 Florida Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 651-5051 (Voice)  
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